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GREY TOWERS

OR

AUNT HETTY'S WILL



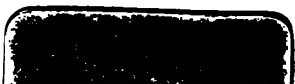
BY

M. M. POLLARD.





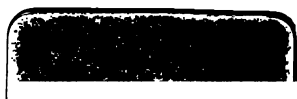
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Reading the will.—Page 239.

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GREY TOWERS;

OR,

AUNT HETTY'S WILL.

BY
M. M. POLLARD,
AUTHOR OF "THE MINER'S SON," "UP TO FIFTEEN," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY F. GILBERT.



LONDON:
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GREY TOWERS; OR, AUNT HETTY'S WILL.

CHAPTER I.

THE CURATE HEARS SOME NEWS.

THE Rev. Leonard Thwaites sits alone in his study one wintry afternoon. It is a dingy, badly fitted-up apartment as far as mere furniture goes, for there is nothing pretty or costly in the room; every article in it seems selected for hard use, not ornament, and more with regard to comfort than mere fashion.

Yet there is a degree of coziness in the place—the fire is good, and its flickering rays light up the dark corner where the book-case stands, and bring out the warm tints of the crimson-covered writing-table, before which the curate of Eastown is at the moment seated.

Piled up beside him is a huge heap of commentaries—well-worn books, that have evidently done much duty in their day—the pages of which Mr. Thwaites is busily employed in consulting, making rapid notes as he goes on.

He is trying to decide a very knotty point of doctrine which Ned Harris, one of his parishioners, had mistakenly

interpreted at the last Bible meeting. The curate intends making that very subject the foundation of his sermon on the next evening; when he hopes to explain away all errors, and make the difficult controversy clear as noonday to all his hearers—the obstinate Ned Harris included.

But long ere he concludes the subject to his satisfaction, the door of his study is softly opened, and his wife comes in, looking more flushed and excited than usual.

“Leonard, Lawyer Wilson’s wife has just called here.”

“Well, my love, I hope she was well,” returns the curate, resignedly; and he dips his pen in the ink, preparing to continue the notes in his brown-covered manuscript book. He has not much sympathy with callers, for he has a kind of idea they take up more time than is necessary.

“Will you listen for one minute, Leonard? She has brought news you *ought* to hear,” says Gertrude quickly.

“Won’t the tidings keep a little longer, for I’m very busy just now?” Mr. Thwaites holds his pen suspended over the paper as he glances up smilingly at his wife.

“No, no, you *must* hear them now, for I can’t keep them to myself one minute longer. Aunt Hetty’s will has been read, and, only think! she has made *that* Tom Burges her sole heir; Grey Towers, and every inch of the property, belongs to him now.”

Leonard wipes his pen carefully, lays it on the inkstand in a meditative way, and pushes up his spectacles on his forehead, ere he replies slowly,—

“One might have expected that would be the case, Gerty; and yet the news brings somewhat of a surprise with it. I hope you are not disappointed? You have not been building up any airy castles about Aunt Hetty’s will, have you?”

“Disappointed! well, I suppose it would be proper to answer, ‘No.’ You and your aunt have not been on terms for years, and therefore we could not reasonably have expected a legacy.”

Mrs. Thwaites speaks out quickly, as though, if she reflected on her words, she could not utter them quite so bravely. At the moment she thinks she is saying the truth, yet there is a tremble in her voice, and a quiver on her lip, that *will* come despite all her bravery.

Leonard does not notice her emotion, but he hears her words, and answers them as if somewhat relieved.

"Oh ! I am glad you were prepared for this, and can see things in the true light, Gerty. You know poor Aunt Hetty was one who never forgave an offence, and doubtless she considered mine a very unpardonable one."

"What was it, Leonard ? You have never told me, often as I have wondered what you could possibly have done to enrage your aunt so terribly."

A quiet smile passes over the face of the curate as he replies,—

"Never you mind, little wife ; don't seek to pry into the 'bluebeard's closet,' for I can't indulge your curiosity on that head. Suffice it to say my offence was one of which I have never repented ; and, moreover, it was one I should commit again if placed in the same circumstances. Did the lawyer's wife tell you whether Ralph Burges had any money left him ?"

"Not a penny. He was never once named in the will. Tom Burges is the sole heir, executor, and everything else."

"Poor Ralph ! Aunt Hetty took very little notice of him after he left Grey Towers."

"Why did he go away ? Or is that a secret also ?"

"It was no secret, Gerty. He openly confessed he was tired of the monotonous life in the old place, and panted to go forth and see the world, and gain some of its experience for himself. Dear me, it seems but a short time ago since we were all three staying at Grey Towers together—Tom Burges, Ralph, and myself."

"Ralph lived there altogether, didn't he ?"

"Yes, Aunt Hetty adopted him, and every one looked on

him as heir to the chief part of her property. Tom and I always spent our holidays at Grey Towers, and merry times we had. How well I recollect them still ! ”

“ You and Ralph were Mrs. Burges’s nearest relatives, were you not ? ”

“ Ralph was nephew to her late husband, I was her own nephew, while Tom was merely a distant connexion ; yet you see *he* has proved to be the favoured one after all.”

Here Mrs. Thwaites’ smothered indignation gives signs of bursting forth, and she exclaims impatiently,—

“ I declare it’s altogether too bad. I call the will a dreadfully unjust one, and I haven’t patience when I think about it.”

“ Now don’t get angry, Gertrude. Aunt Hetty had full control over her property ; she might have turned Grey Towers into a lunatic asylum, and have left her money to endow it, had she liked.”

“ Then I call it a shame such stupid old women should have so much power in their own hands,” exclaims Gertrude.

The curate draws down the spectacles over his eyes again, dips his pen in the ink, turns over his papers, thus giving unmistakeable signs that he wants to be at work again ; his wife takes the hint, and departs without further ebullition of feeling, closing the door softly after her as she goes.

Then she walks with ruffled brow and slow steps towards the nursery at the top of the house.

A bare, grim, shabby little room that same nursery is, well trodden by tiny feet, and used and marred by tiny fingers. It looks particularly dingy in the raw, cheerless, November afternoon, with the grey twilight fast creeping in at the uncurtained window.

Sarah, the one servant of the curate’s meagre household, is holding the baby on her lap, while another little creature, a year or two older, is sitting on a low stool at the fire.

Harry and Lenny, the two bigger children, are at the window making a miniature Punch and Judy show. The whole floor round them is strewn with scraps and shreds, chips and tatters, of all hues and sizes—a perfect litter, in fact, such as boys are found to delight in.

Loud screams of welcome from the two youngest greet the mother as she comes in, and Gertrude takes the baby into her arms at once.

"Now, Sarah, you may run away and finish your work. Have you much more to do?"

"Only to clean up the kitchen, ma'am ; polish the tins, scour down the steps, broom out the yard, brush the shoes, and get the tea ready."

"Make haste, then, and try to get it all finished. Tell me when the kettle is boiling," says her mistress, as she seats herself among the children.

Off runs Sarah, glad enough to get rid of her extra nursing on this busy Saturday afternoon. She goes quickly downstairs to begin, ay, and to finish the multitudinous list of tasks that Mrs. Wilson's two servants would call a "heavy day's work."

Baby Maud—a frail, sickly, exacting child—would fain monopolize all her mother's attention did not curly-haired, sunny-faced, blue-eyed Lotty put in her claim to an equal share, and insist, with childish jealousy, on a due amount of notice also. Poor Mrs. Thwaites feels the worries of the children rather a wholesome discipline to her just now.

For, disguise the fact as she may, hide it as much as she can, this news about Aunt Hetty's will has greatly disturbed her. Of late years her life has come to be one of such hard struggle, and trying, up-hill work.

What can be more wearisome than the constant striving, the endless planning she has to make that sadly insufficient stipend of Leonard's supply the wants of her numerous household?

left us a hundred a year, or fifty pounds a year, what a comfort it would have been. Nay, had she only bequeathed us enough money to keep a second servant to help poor Sarah, the drudge, or even given us a few pounds to buy the children warm winter clothes and new shoes, I should have been *so* thankful. Leonard won't feel the disappointment as I do. He has none of the miserable, carping, fretful cares that come so heavily into a woman's lot. He has never to sit among the children as I must, listening to their peevishness, correcting their faults, and striving to satisfy their wants. Why a single month of that sort of thing would make him as weary as I am sometimes.

"He won't even have time to fret about being disinherited. What with his books and writing, his classes and parochial visiting, his lectures and sermons, his meetings and vestries, he has never a minute to sit down and repine and fret.

"Then, I don't believe Leonard really cares about money; he is the most unworldly man I ever met with. I have no patience with him sometimes; even now I verily believe his spirit of resignation will shine out all the more brightly from having had this wretched disappointment about Aunt Hetty's will. Oh, I wish more of Leonard's spirit was mine."

Here Gertrude's train of thought is brought to a sudden stop, for a louder clamour than usual bursts forth from the boys that calls for immediate maternal interference.

"Lenny, Lenny, stop that noise! Your shrill voice goes through my ears like a rasp," exclaims she, turning quickly towards the window where the delinquents are still arguing noisily.

"Mamma, it's all Harry's fault; he's spoiling the Punch's show and hurting my puppets. If he'd only have patience I'd soon show him how to pull the strings properly."

"You are both tired of the game, so give it up. Harry, clear away that rubbish on the floor, and Lenny come

here and hold Maud for a few minutes while I go down and see what Sarah is doing ; I'm sure it must be nearly tea-time."

But baby Maud has no notion of being disposed of in that summary manner ; she sets up a loud shriek the moment her brother touches her, while Lotty clings to her mamma's skirts like a little burr.

"Tiresome children, all of you!" exclaims Mrs. Thwaites, with unwonted impatience, as she sets herself to soothe Maud into quietness again.

With the news of the unjust will still ringing in her ears, disturbing the current of her thoughts and vexing her heart ; the nursery worries press on her with increased weight, and she murmurs wearily to herself,—

"Even Leonard would lose his patience among these children."

Yet nothing can be more tender than her soothing of the fractious little one, or softer than her voice as she coaxes and hushes it to bring its wails to silence. Some words she has lately met with rush into her memory at the moment : she repeats them, half aloud, as though they had been a nursery rhythm, and they bring calmness to the child by the low music of her voice, and quiet to herself by the deep earnestness of their teaching,—

"O earth, so full of dreary noises !
O men, with wailing in your voices !
O delved gold, the wailer's heap !
O strife, O curse that o'er it fall !
God makes a silence through you all,
And giveth His beloved sleep."

Presently Sarah taps briskly at the door. She has put on a clean white apron, fresh in its folds, and pure as country washing can make it ; her face is polished to its utmost shining power, and she smiles knowingly as she lays a letter on the table.

"From Miss Katie, ma'am. Don't I know the dear

young lady's handwriting as well as my own? Please, ma'am, all my work's done except just getting the tea ready and making the master's slice of toast."

"Then I'll manage that, Sarah, while you stay here with the children. I'll call you all down to tea presently. Maudie's a good, quiet little pet now, and won't cry any more."

"I'll take care she don't cry, ma'am; she's always satisfied when she's with me—the dear, precious, little duck of diamonds."

The nursery term of endearment—whatever it may mean—seems to pacify Maud, who lets her mamma depart now without a murmur.





CHAPTER II.

IN THE STUDY.

EERTRUDE puts the letter from her eldest daughter into her pocket unopened. The reading of Katie's letters is always a pleasant employment, so she reserves its perusal as a special treat for Leonard and herself when they are once more alone together.

Then Mrs. Thwaites sets herself about the duties proposed. Under her nimble, well-trained fingers the dining-room table speedily shows forth preparations for the children's meal—mugs of sops for the little ones, milk and water, and thick slices of bread, with a thin coating of butter, for the big boys.

Next she lays out a small tray that just holds a dainty tea-set, azure, and white, and gold—one of the few remaining, long-ago marriage presents given her when she became the curate's bride. The tray holds also a plated rack of cold toast, and a pat of butter, enough for her husband's and her own frugal meal.

As she moves nimbly about her occupations, one might observe her face has resumed its usual hopeful look, her clear brown eyes are bright and pleasant as ever. Mrs. Thwaites is a busy, active little woman, with a genial face and trim figure, a well-shaped head, and glossy dark brown hair. She possesses a great deal of that useful gift the Americans call "faculty," for she can put her hands to most

things, and is not ashamed to confess it. From training the church choir at the harmonium to making her children's clothes, or cooking her husband's dinner, nothing seems to come amiss to her; she is equal to any duty in parlour, study, or kitchen. Gertrude's is an industrious, helpful, many-sided experience. Not often is she so depressed as we have seen her on her first appearance on the scene; but then, as she says herself, "Aunt Hetty's odious will was enough to put any one out of patience."

Mrs. Thwaites fancies her husband has felt no disappointment as she has done; but here she is mistaken, and proves the truth of the saying that we never really know our dearest friends. There are heights and depths in Leonard's character that she, with all her clear-sightedness, with all her love and reverence for him, has never been able to understand and fathom.

The tidings have strangely unsettled the curate. When his wife leaves the study that afternoon, he returns at once to his books of reference. He looks up and down the pages to hunt out the testimony of learned men who have left their ideas on the very question he is endeavouring to decide; but, somehow, he finds the thread of his research is tangled and confused. His ideas have been disturbed, and he cannot settle them down again. More than once he finds himself leaning on the table with his face buried in his hands. Glimpses, and scenes, and echoes from the past flash into his memory with a vividness he cannot repress. In imagination he is once more at Grey Towers with Aunt Hetty, Tom Burges, and Ralph.

Tom is a very black sheep indeed amongst them in those days; he is nobody's favourite—least of all, Aunt Hetty's.

His grasping, avaricious, mean ways are all well known to both Leonard and his aunt. Tom does many things for money's sake that a more scrupulous man would shrink from with horror. Ever planning, ever trying to accomplish his own ends, he cares little who comes to the ground in the

battle of life, so that he may tread over the field with flying colours and with step of triumph. His character is one Leonard distrusts and detests even in those far-away days.

Ralph, the sunny-hearted, the restless, and thoughtless, is his aunt's prime favourite; he torments her with his boyish tricks, while he draws her heart closer towards him in indulgent affection.

For in those days Aunt Hetty is fond and loving; she has not then developed into the crabbed, suspicious, distrustful, exacting woman she becomes in after years. She is even bright, keen, and clever, neither averse to society nor sociability, and always delighted to have "her boys," as she calls them, about the old house.

But things have strangely altered now. Ralph is disinherited for no other reason than that he has grown weary of the calm life at Grey Towers, and with youthful impetuosity longs to be out, jostling amidst the crowd of the busy world, seeing and judging, asking and doing for himself.

Mrs. Burges angrily bids him "Go," and then her heart seems to close from him from that hour.

Ere long she has cast off Leonard Thwaites also, because he has presumed to fall in love without her leave, and when, by-and-by, he marries the portionless, brown-eyed, pretty Gertrude Ashton, the measure of his iniquity is complete. Gertrude, the daughter of a retired naval officer, brings him no fortune but the loving affection of her fresh, true, trusting heart.

Aunt Hetty waxes furious at her nephew's imprudence, and her anger culminates in the breach never afterwards made up. The cause of his aunt's wrath is the only secret Leonard ever keeps from his wife, and this, with a half-amused, half-assumed reticence, he rigidly conceals in the depths of his own heart.

Tom Burges has often been down to Grey Towers of late. Sometimes he comes there alone, at other times his wife *and members* of his family are with him. The inquisitive

people at Eastown watch him driving about in Aunt Hetty's dark-green carriage, and notice him sitting in her large pew at church. Doubtless these visits of Tom to Grey Towers are his golden opportunities for gaining an influence over the old woman; he makes his metaphorical "hay while the sun shines," and brings things to the very conclusion he wishes.

Well, all is over now. Leonard's numberless attempts at reconciliation with his aunt have all signally failed. She is gone down to her grave silent, resentful, and unforgiving to the last.

Her wealth has latterly brought her but little happiness after all; it has severed her from those who valued her most, and Leonard, who really loved his aunt and cherishes fond memories of her, grieves for her now with a deep grief.

As he sits in the study, his pen and papers forgotten—his eyes are covered with his clasped hands still—and his thoughts are far away in the past. Presently a low tap at the door rouses him, and opening it he sees his wife standing outside with the little tea-tray in her hands. The shadow is gone from her heart now, and she looks up smilingly as she makes room for the tray amongst the crowd of books on the table.

"Finished your sermon, Leonard?"

"Not yet, Gerty; but I'm glad tea is ready—a cup of your best brew will refresh me wonderfully, and perhaps rouse up my ideas a little."

"I made the tea extra strong this afternoon, and here's a letter to cheer you. It is from Katie."

"Ah, indeed! Our daughter is growing a famous correspondent; she will equal her mother in that respect some day. Do you recollect, Gerty, what yards and yards of penmanship you used to send me when I was at college?"

"Yes, to be sure I do; and I remember, too, what rubbish

I used to write—just whatever was uppermost in my thoughts. How foolish people are when they are young," retorts wise Gertrude, as she glances up archly at her husband.

The letter is soon read, and then it is discovered that Katie's godmother has invited her down to Yorkshire to spend her Christmas holidays.

"Now, I call that very kind of Miss Hay. She is always so thoughtful for Katie. Do you know, Leonard, I sometimes think she means to provide altogether for her? Paying her schooling, and giving her such nice presents of clothes, and inviting her so often to her house, looks like it. Doesn't it?"

Leonard shakes his head chidingly.

"There you are again, little wife, piling up another airy castle. Don't give way to such a habit, my dear; it only makes the reality harder to bear. Let Aunt Hetty's will be a warning in that respect, and leave the future to be unveiled by Him who alone holds its deep secrets."

Leonard speaks gravely, but Mrs. Thwaites is not inclined to give up the point quite so easily. She does not reply, nor does she feel convinced her idea is a mere fancy. She gives the coals a quick jerk with the poker, and the flame flashes out, showing her face still a little flushed.

Though she has been disappointed now, that is no reason why Miss Hay should give her disappointment also; she holds her pet expectation too firmly to let it topple to the ground all at once.

She mentally comes to this decision, as kneeling on the hearth-rug she vigorously rakes the embers together, and tries to coax them into a steady brightness. Leonard has a trick of letting his fire droop, and sometimes go out altogether, while he is hard at work over his books.

As if by tacit consent, neither husband nor wife again bring up the subject that has been distracting their minds so much. They talk of their eldest daughter, who has so

pleasantly won the favour of the rich Miss Hay, her god-mother, and they discuss the plans and wants for her coming visit to Yorkshire.

They chat on with low, cheery voices of their other children also; bright little sayings and doings of whom Gertrude is apt to repeat for her husband's gratification, and which he is ever ready to smile at and enjoy.

Thus they pass the quiet tea-hour on that Saturday evening. It is a calm, happy time, snatched from the worry of domestic toil, and from the thralldom of brain-work and books. Both husband and wife feel all the better for it, and return to their labours again refreshed and strengthened.

When Gertrude has retired from the study once more, bearing the tray in her hands, Leonard pauses for a moment's silent reflection, then he resolutely piles up all his old commentaries together, and puts them in their places, high up on his book-shelves.

He just as resolutely banishes Ned Harris's crabbed and involved point of doctrine out of his mind altogether, with the conclusion it is better to talk over the matter in a private discussion with that worthy, but very argumentative man.

"He gets his ideas so twisted and warped that it will take me a long time to bring him to take a sound, healthful view of the doctrine," muses Leonard; and then he selects quite another subject for his sermon for the next evening.

Drawing forth a worn little Bible, that has long been his companion in college and parish—a book well marked with references, and familiar to him in every page—he turns over a leaf or two, and fixes on a text.

Only a few words, but they enfold, like a priceless treasure, a sweet loving message from the Saviour to the weary and heavy-laden sinner; only a line, but it breathes forth the full, free tidings of salvation.

Rapidly flow on Leonard's thoughts now; his pen

hardly keep pace with them as his soul warms to the subject, and his heart throbs and glows as sentence after sentence of fervid, impassioned eloquence runs on in quick succession. Warm thoughts, vivid ideas, breathe forth from the paper, clothed withal in the simple Saxon that the English wayfaring man need never stumble at.

A sure panacea this to his late train of uneasy reflection ; it all seems to disperse and melt away as he writes on. Unworldly and sterling man as the curate undoubtedly is, yet his mind is more than a little exercised ere he can try to exonerate Aunt Hetty from the charge of blind partiality, and injustice, in the will she has left behind her. Perhaps he cannot altogether withdraw his blame after all ; but he can endeavour to conquer the disturbance it has raised in his heart, so he brings this case, as he does all others, to Him who is the best judge of what is good for His people. Ere long quiet contentment comes back to his mind, and he ceases even to wonder why all has happened as it has done.

Yet Aunt Hetty might have sprinkled many more pleasures over the curate's home had she so chosen. The machinery of his little, hardly-pressed household would have gone on all the more smoothly with a fuller supply of oil to the wheels, a larger stock of grist to the mill. His study shelves would have looked all the better with a few more choice books on them. There are costly volumes and precious ones, that Leonard longs for, with all the eagerness of a student, but the price keeps them from his grasp, and the chance of his ever getting them seems even further off than before.





CHAPTER III.

THE NEW MASTER OF GREY TOWERS.

TOM BURGES is a very satisfied man when all the preliminaries are finally over, and he finds himself free to do as he pleases on the estate Aunt Hetty has left him. With his usual keen worldly wisdom, one of his first steps is to discharge all the old servants and retainers about the place, before he puts in an appearance as master there.

He thinks it best to come into possession as a free, unbiassed owner, with no family traditions or old-world sentimentality ready to crop up and confront him at every turn.

So it happens, that when he drives in through the lodge gates of Grey Towers in his smart new dog-cart, there is only Ned Hartley there to meet him, and he comes limping out of the stables, all in a hurry, to greet the Squire.

"I suppose you received my letter, Hartley," says Tom graciously, as he flourishes his whip in his daintily-gloved fingers.

"Oh, yes, sir ; and my misses is quite ready to wait on your honour as long as you're pleased to want her."

"All right then ; but I shan't be here long now. The workmen are coming to put the place in order next week."

He throws the reins to the man, and proudly stalks up the broad steps to the house.

Many people might have shrunk from the dreary stillness of the place, and have felt awed by the solemn gloom of the shut-up mansion.

Rooms with shutters closed over the windows, and passages that echo to no foot-fall, galleries where cobwebs are quickly beginning to cluster, and walls already growing damp and mildewed.

But Tom Burges has not much reverence or sentimentality about him. He strides about the place and feels himself master of it from floor to roof, from wall to ceiling. With a huge, rusty bunch of keys in his hand, he goes about bravely from room to room.

"Faugh! the place smells as close and musty as an old vault, but I'll soon remedy that," exclaims he as he makes his way to the great drawing rooms; and one after another he throws the windows wide open.

Then the fresh pure air comes streaming in, and the early spring sunshine lights up the place.

Mr. Burges goes towards a window, leans against the sill, and stands for a while contemplating the fair scene that opens out to his view.

A bright landscape with the noon-day sun pouring down a flood of golden splendour. Before the house an ample lawn that seems to merge, on either side, into pretty park-like enclosures of trees and shrubs. Further off, broad fields of pasture-land sloping down by gradual descent to the banks of a somewhat winding river. Still further in the distance, a range of irregularly shaped hills, wooded to the very outline, and flecked and dotted here and there with snug farms with their homesteads, outhouses, and belongings.

Nothing can be brighter than the tender greens on the trees now just donning their spring garb, or more graceful than the purple tassels on the pines and larches, or more luxuriant than the emerald tints of the grassy sward.

The new Squire, though he has no poet's eye to note the

harmony of nature, is yet very well satisfied with the view, and feels his heart throb with proud elation as the indescribable spell of beauty attracts him.

"Something better than North Alley, this," muses he pleasantly. "Somewhat better air here than the mixture of dust and fog I used to inflate my lungs with in that dingy, cramped-up old office of mine. Ten times better a look-out than we had at Kingston even. Let me see—here are water and field, hill and tree, pasture-land and valley. I never admired the view so much before, often as I've seen it. True, the place is my own now, and I daresay that makes the chief charm after all. Well! after a man has given the prime of his life to hard work, he deserves a pleasant resting-place to settle down in, and I've been no sluggard in my day. I've worked hard enough for any one."

North Alley was the salubrious locality off one of the business streets in London—in which Mr. Burges had till very lately carried on his employment of ship-broker—and at Kingston was the very minute, highly-genteel villa where his family lived, and from, and to which, his daily journeys had sped.

But this experience is already a thing of the past. Tom Burges is coming out in a new character, his ledgers are closed, his business disposed of, his office let to another, and he is preparing to enter with becoming zest into all the responsibilities and enjoyments of a wealthy country gentleman.

Had he glanced out of the side windows of the Grey Towers he would have seen the dingy houses and smoky factories that form the village of Eastown, where Leonard Thwaites lives.

An ugly, roughly-paved, ill-built place that same Eastown is on a near view, yet mellowed by distance, the rude outlines are half hidden, and the hideousness is partially softened. The groups of crowded buildings with their tiled

roofs, and quaint gables, the narrow streets with their abrupt turnings, become even picturesque from a far-away standpoint.

But the squire has neither time nor inclination to look that way, nor does he think of his kinsman, the curate, except with a superior sort of pity, mingled with a degree of triumph in his thoughts.

There is enough in *Grey Towers* to occupy his full attention now. With the eye of a connoisseur he paces about the huge drawing-rooms, the furniture and painting of which has all grown sombre, and grey, and faded, during Aunt Hetty's fifty years reign there.

This dinginess must be all banished, and Tom's vivid imagination conjures up pictures of the rooms as they shall appear by-and-by.

Delicate papers shall clothe the walls, rich carpets of the most approved pattern and costly texture, shall replace the threadbare, dingy old curiosities that are now stretched on the floors. Elegant furniture, dainty colouring, choice pictures, pretty effects ! shall all embellish the place. Whatever money can buy shall ere long adorn the old house, and delight the heart and please the eye.

It is an entrancing study to the new owner. He stands a long time with his arms folded, rapt in contemplation, as his fancy sketches out the glowing scene ere long to spring out of the gloomy one before him.

Then Tom grows practical, his old business habits return, and with pencil and paper he reduces his fancies to a clearly drawn-out plan of his intended improvements.

He goes up to Aunt Hetty's bedchamber. The room has been but little disturbed since the poor old lady was borne from it to her quiet resting-place in Eastown churchyard.

Surely some feeling of awe or respect makes the squire pause thus at the door, as he glances rapidly round the *apartment*.

No, he is only thinking what a gloomy old room it looks now, and that it will do for a future guest-chamber when visitors shall by-and-by be gathered at Grey Towers. He is only deciding that the odious four-posted bedstead, with its citreen moreen curtains, and its heavy fringes shall be banished for ever, and the whole contour of the room changed.

Two ebony cabinets, with wondrous gilded birds and flowers painted on its doors, stand in this chamber; an old-fashioned chest of drawers is there also, various antique boxes, a brass-bound desk, and several locked-up closets, all full of curiosities and valuable things. Sacred places these, hitherto! familiar only to Aunt Hetty's eyes, and carefully guarded from the prying gaze of relative or servant.

Most men of delicate and sensitive mind would feel some reluctance in meddling with the cherished secrets of the dead. If needs be, they must bring them forth to the light, they would handle them respectfully, and go about the task with a hushed, subdued spirit. Tom Burges however is free from all such scruples, no timid nicety hinders his research, and he plunges his hands carelessly into box and drawer.

For hours to come he may be seen prying into secret corners, and bringing into scrutiny all the hoarded treasures Aunt Hetty has so carefully kept out of sight.

He unfolds silk dresses of marvellous richness and curious design that are still in the piece, and are wrapped up in time-stained paper. He examines jewels and trinkets, laces and ribbons, that would supply the toilets of half-a-dozen moderately fashionable ladies.

He opens journals in parchment bindings, looks over papers on law and household matters, he glances at bills and receipts, pockets little sums of hoarded money, draws out huge packets of letters that are arranged with methodical regularity, and tied with pink tape.

Fain would he go through every document in the large

brass-bound desk, but the gloom of twilight begins to gather round the old chamber, making weird-like, fantastic shadows, and warning him he must bring his inspection to a close for the present.

He draws out a packet of yellow letters from the desk, that had been locked in a private drawer, and he carefully examines the dates and names.

"Ah! here is a packet of the old lady's love letters. What fun to be sure. I'll just carry the whole lot home with me to amuse our people a little," muses he, with a laugh, as he thrusts the packet into his coat pocket.

Then he locks up all the secret places again, shuts the windows and doors, and leaves Grey Towers once more to its silence and solitude.

His work is not over yet, though. Numbers of workmen are outside in the yard, waiting for him by appointment, and to these he gives full directions about what he wishes done. The furniture is to be removed, and the renovating process to be commenced without delay.

Ned Hartley is lingering outside the lodge gates, trotting about, and waiting for his master. He pats the horse, draws the rug more closely over the animal, and every now and then casts furtive glances towards the house, wondering what is keeping the squire there so long.

"Ah! Hartley, you are ready, I see. Drive me over to the station at once; I shall be just in time for the next train."

"Yes, your honour."

"And mind, I leave the horse and trap under your charge till I come down again."

"Will you be long away, sir?"

"No, I shall be down again on Monday morning. The Eastown workmen are to meet me then."

"It'll be putting a brave lot of work into their hands, sir."

"You may well say that, Hartley. Grey Towers is in a sad state of dilapidation now, but before long we'll have it put to rights, I hope. I am going to send some first-class hands down from London, to do the painting and gilding, and finishing."

"I suppose, sir, her ladyship and your family will be coming down here to live before long?" suggests Ned, touching his cap, and looking the very model of respectful curiosity.

The squire smiles at the title bestowed on his wife, but he does not correct the man's mistake, as he replies condescendingly,—

"I hope we shall *all* be snugly settled at Grey Towers by Midsummer. By that time the hot, dusty streets of London will be getting unbearable, and we shall be longing for a breath of your pure country air down here. Faugh! I'm getting to detest the city in summer—catch me staying there longer than I can help, this season."

Tom says all this to the man, partly because he is longing to talk to somebody or other about his affairs, and there is no one else there to listen to him. Then he recollects himself, and adds in a tone of authority,—

"Hartley, groom the mare well, and drive over to the station on Monday morning to meet me. I shall come by the first train."

The squire takes his seat in a first-class railway carriage with a very satisfied air. He is well pleased with his day's work, for he has put things in a fair training. Ere many more months are passed, he hopes to enjoy some of the sweets of his new position, and to enter with becoming dignity into all the excitement and responsibilities that will necessarily accrue to him, as owner of the long-coveted inheritance.



CHAPTER IV.

THE SQUIRE'S DAUGHTER.

IN the tiny suburban villa Tom Burges has of late called "home," are seated two ladies anxiously awaiting his return from Grey Towers.

The supper table has long been spread, and Mrs. Burges sits by the fire, alternately nodding and glancing at the time-piece. She is still a comely matron, of a handsome portly presence, with quick black eyes, and long, glossy black hair, that yet bears a purple bloom like that of the ripe plum in the sunlight. She is nicely dressed, though not yet adorned with the new, costly garments she means to wear when they are once settled down in their grand country home.

A tired, happy, satisfied woman is Mrs. Burges, as she lies back in the leather-covered chair, half watching, half dreaming. Her very fatigue has somewhat of gratification in it, for what could have been more enjoyable to one of her stamp than the arduous duties with which she has been occupied on that day?

Hours and hours have sped on, all unheeded in their course, while she has lingered at the counters of the most fashionable shops at the West End, where she has critically selected the rich garments most becoming to herself and Alice.

It was so delightful to be waited on by obsequious shop-men, who soon found out the price was no object to their

customer, and who vied with each other in bringing forth the most costly articles for her approval.

Mrs. Burges had not forgotten her sons either ; she bought handsome presents for Philip, some less gorgeous ones for her two boys at school, and she had ordered fitting garments for the other two lads, not yet emerged from the nursery.

What had she *not* purchased with the contents of her well-filled purse ? The very handling of so much money was in itself a new and most delicious satisfaction.

Again she had been in furniture warehouses studying the most elegant make of drawing-room and bed-room suites, looking at the patterns of fashionable carpets, and selecting, here and there, at a price that made her smile inwardly at her own extravagance.

Then she had visited offices where cooks, housemaids, and footmen assembled to be hired, and these had passed in review before her, all eager to obtain a place in her future establishment. They were all of such unexceptionable character, and of such noted skill, that one marvelled where all the incapables had vanished on that particular day.

It had been perfect enjoyment to Mrs. Burges to question and talk to these domestics, it was like the dawning of her coming grandeur and rule.

So it is not to be wondered at that she gives way to a degree of the *dolce far niente*. She is a little tired, a little drowsy, and the well-earned sensation is rather pleasant than otherwise.

Alice, a slim, pretty girl of about twenty, has not entered into the pleasures of that day of excitement with anything like the zest her mother has displayed. She really *is* tired, and wishes supper was ready, and has more than once expressed her wishes aloud to her mother.

We will glance at the young lady for a minute, as she bends her gracefully-formed head over the banner-screen on which she is at present employed.

Her hair is pale brown, her eyes a deep blue, with just the faintest shadow of sadness in their expression. Her features are delicate and regular, and her cheeks bear the pale pink tint of the early hedge-rose.

"Not a strong-minded woman by any means!" some one exclaims, as they notice certain traits of indecision in the fair young face, and in the plastic formation of her mouth—and the judgment is quite correct; Alice *is* gentle, and yielding, affectionate and confiding, and rather too apt to be influenced by those who have stronger wills than her own.

Not unlike is she to the flower of her favourite plant of wood-sorrel, that stands over yonder in the window. Sunshine, and warmth, and brightness, will bring forth all its beauty, it will expand in the soft light; and thus her heart is ready to give forth all the sweet, frank confidences of her generous nature at the smile of love and sympathy. But let the cold wind of hardness, or distrust, or unkindness sweep over her, and the little flower, with its tightly-folded leaves, is not more unapproachable, and drooping, and closed-up, than she can become.

Mrs. Burges is too drowsy for much conversation with her daughter just now, so Alice goes on rapidly with her dainty work.

She is forming groups of white lilies with opal-looking beads on a scarlet background. It is a banner-screen for the drawing-room of Grey Towers. The thoughts, ideas, occupations, and industries of the whole Burges family merge in that direction now, and one wonders how they can possibly find room for anything else in their lives at present.

The timepiece ticks away on the bracket, and at last strikes ten. Then Alice looks up from her work.

"Isn't papa very late to-night?"

"The train is only just due. He'll be here directly. Did Philip go to meet him?" replies Mrs. Burges with a yawn.

"Yes, he told me he was going to King's Cross, and said

they would both come home together. Mamma, I wish you had called me 'Hetty,' instead of 'Alice.'"

"Why in the world should you wish that, child?"

Mrs. Burges rouses herself a little, and turns round to look with surprise at her daughter.

"Oh! because it would have been a mark of respect to dear Aunt Hetty; everybody calls her 'Aunt Hetty,' you know."

"If you had known the old lady, Alice, you would hardly have found her very 'dear.' She was a crabbed, obstinate, prejudiced, and tiresome woman at most times."

"Perhaps she grew strange and altered at last. Living so much alone was sufficient to warp any one's judgment, and sour their disposition. But there must have been some sterling, loveable traits in her character, or Ralph would not have liked and respected her so much."

"I'm sure Ralph Burges had no great need to sound her praises!" bursts out Mrs. Burges, now fully awake.

"Perhaps not, mamma, as matters have turned out. But he always spoke kindly of his aunt, and I'm sure he would do the same now, though she seemed to forget him altogether before her death. I wish Aunt Hetty had left him some share of her fortune, ever so slight a remembrance would have been better than that cold, unpardoning silence."

"Nonsense, Alice! You know nothing at all about the matter, and the less you talk about things you don't understand, the better it will be for yourself and everybody else, so be careful what you say in future. There, that's your father's footstep, run and open the door, before he gives one of his loud knocks, and wakens up the children," exclaims Mrs. Burges impatiently.

Squire Burges and Philip come in laughing and talking, and apparently in high spirits.

"Here I am! home again, you see! safe and sound, and tired and hungry," exclaims the squire as he enters the room.

"Oh ! if hunger and thirst are your only ailments, we'll soon cure them. Supper is quite ready, and here's your easy chair. Alice, put away your bead-work now, and run down and tell Ann to bring up the cutlets, nice and hot."

They all gather round the supper table ; Mr. Burges eats the good fare provided for him with a relish, and talks loudly and cheerily between whiles. Prosperity is agreeing wonderfully well with him, it keeps him, for the present, in a state of chronic good humour and excitement.

Alice listens to the details of his visit to Grey Towers in a state of wild bewilderment. She has never been there during the various brief visits her mother has made to Eastown, so it is to her a "terra incognita," an enchanted spot full of fairy spells, an El Dorado abounding in glorious treasures, of which Aunt Hetty has been the guardian and the good genius.

After supper, when they have drawn around the fire—for the evenings are still chilly—Mr. Burges brings forth the packet of love letters from his pocket.

"Here, Alice, I've something to amuse you for awhile. I found a parcel of the old woman's love letters ; there's no doubt about the genuineness ; look at the names and dates on the cover outside. A precious old-fashioned love story it must have been, all acted out, and done with long before I was born. Here, read some of the letters aloud to us. Let's see how people managed these sort of affairs when Aunt Hetty was a girl."

Alice, nothing loath, takes the packet and opens it. The dates had all been arranged with strict exactness, by the withered fingers, now cold in the grave, so she begins with the first.

The squire stretches himself back in his easy chair, with a half-smile on his face, ready to seize hold of, and enjoy in undisguised merriment any funny points that may be disclosed in the affair.

But somehow, there is no fun in that reading. Human

nature in Aunt Hetty's girlhood was much the same as it is now. Though the paper is yellow, the ink faded, the writing cramped, the wording peculiar, still, the experience Alice unfolds is a marvellously pathetic one. It is the passionate pleading of a heart fondly loved, but doubted, tried, misunderstood, and finally forgiven.

Not long has Alice's clear voice sounded through the room before its tones begin to tremble, great tears gather in her eyes, blotting out the words like a mist. She tries to recover herself, but the drops fall over her cheeks, a choking rises in her throat she cannot repress, and she throws down the letters on the table, and rushes out of the room in a burst of sobs.

Philip and his father both laugh, the former boisterously, the latter uneasily. This behaviour of his daughter puzzles Mr. Burges very much, and that night, when he and his wife are alone together, he alludes to it again.

"Strange conduct that of Alice this evening! What an odd, sensitive girl she is. I hope she is not brooding over that foolish affair of hers with Ralph Burges still."


"I'm sure I hope not, Tom. It would be very awkward indeed, as things have turned out now."

There is an undefined anxiety in her voice as she speaks.

"Awkward! That's far too mild a term. It would be outrageous, detestable, hateful! and more than that, it shall never be encouraged. I'll have none of that wretched nonsense cropping up again. You may give Alice my opinion on the subject, if you see occasion for doing so."

"Poor Ralph would be no match for Alice now, and I'm sure she must see that herself plainly enough," replies Mrs. Burges; but the doubtful anxiety still lingers in her eyes and in her voice.

And amidst all her visions of fast-coming grandeur, this tiresome topic will ever and again intrude itself. There is no putting it out of her memory, or crushing it down under foot, or of getting rid of it in any other way.



Even that night when she goes to bed, Ralph and Alice get so intermingled in her thoughts and dreams that she tosses sleeplessly on her pillow, disturbed by a great dread. A short time ago she had been pleased at her daughter's betrothal to Ralph, and had smiled approvingly on their affection for each other; but now, the very recollection is odious, it is a page of the past she would fain blot out for ever, if possible.





CHAPTER V.

LENNY'S LOGIC.

JULY is on the earth—glowing, sunny, bountiful July—ere Squire Burges and his family finally arrive at Grey Towers. Externally, the mansion is not much changed. It has ever been, even in Aunt Hetty's time, a well-kept, orderly place.

Not picturesque, indeed, like the stately Gothic buildings of our land, that seem to harmonize so perfectly with shady country nooks, with the graceful outline of hills, and the calm repose of sweeping valleys, that stand out like rural palaces, amidst the shelter of time-honoured trees, and make even bricks and mortar, stones and glass, a part and portion of one universal rustic idyl.

Grey Towers is not grand and historic either, like an Elizabethan mansion, with its many galleries, its mullioned bay windows, and courtly ornamental terraces.

Neither is it solemn in the Palladian style. It is merely a substantial, commodious house, such as many a country squire would consider the very "beau ideal" of comfort and luxury. The only peculiarities about the building are the four grey towers, which are somewhat ambitiously perched at the corners of the massive roof, and which Sir Stanley West, a near neighbour, was wont to designate playfully as "Aunt Hetty's pepper-boxes," and which were deemed worthy of giving the place its somewhat peculiar name. The

building is respectable from its size alone. Its accessories of well-grown shrubberies, large gardens, extensive conservatories, and lofty stables, make it a very imposing place indeed to the newly-arrived Burges' family.

Gertrude Thwaites first sees the strangers as they come into Eastown Church on the warmest of all warm July mornings.

All the doors and most of the windows of the church are thrown wide open, in the vain hope of luring in a stray breeze or two from the hills, but everything is scorching, still, and drooping with the heat.

Chirps from the twittering birds, and restless bleatings from the sheep, come floating in with the tones of the chiming bells.

The curate's wife sits leaning back in her pew, between Harry and Lenny, listening to the various sounds, and vainly trying to tone down her heated brow to something like coolness.

She has just marshalled the crowding Sunday scholars into their places, and left them in charge of a teacher, whose patience is likely to be sorely tried in keeping the impatient little creatures quiet in that atmosphere of oppressive sultriness.

Mrs. Thwaites can see the churchyard from her seat, with rows of grave-stones on either side of it. Some monuments are old and grey, moss-grown and crumbling with age; others are fresh and new with paint and gilding.

Solemn memorials these of congregations like the present one. Generation after generation have gathered in that old church, and have offered up their service of prayer and praise, and by-and-by they have passed away to their lowly resting-places outside its walls.

" One army of the living God,
To His command they bow,
Part of the host have crossed the flood,
And part are crossing now."

Thoughts somewhat in this strain are passing through Gertrude's mind, when all at once she becomes aware of some unusual stir at the outer gates. There is a rapid driving up of wheels, a prancing of horses, a sound of voices hardly subdued enough for the time and place, a rustle of glistening, light-coloured silks, a flutter of feathers, ribbons, and laces ; then she becomes aware Squire Burges and his family are coming into church.

Tom and his wife walk up the aisle with an assured step, glancing loftily round them, at the rustics, as they pass on, while Alice Burges, with her head slightly bowed, her eyes averted, and a reverent demeanour, follows in their wake.

Philip and the two little boys come after. A large addition to the Eastown congregation was this family from Grey Towers.

The eyes of most of the Sunday scholars and admiring villagers are curiously fixed on the high-backed, old-fashioned pew, that had once been Aunt Hetty's, and they are rewarded with a glimpse of the squire's bald head, and with a flutter of his wife's white feathers.

That day while Mrs. Thwaites presides at her nursery dinner, her thoughts wander off in the direction of the new parishioners.

"I wonder whether Leonard will wish me to call on them?"

At the moment she cannot ask her husband the question, for he is in the study, and she usually has but little of his company between the three Sunday services. They follow each other so rapidly, supplemented so often by burials and christenings, that it has become the rule in the curate's house for the family to dine without him.

Leonard prefers spending the short intervals of time alone in his study. There, with his plate of luncheon and cup of coffee beside him, he can still peruse his books, and in a measure keep his train of serious thoughts unbroken.

Only after the evening service does he meet his wife at table, and then, truth to say, he is generally too tired and exhausted either to talk or to enjoy the very appetizing relish she is sure to have ready for him.

While Gertrude minces Lotty's cold mutton, mashes her potatoes, and cuts the boys' more substantial supplies from the joint, this question of a possible visit to Grey Towers is still the burden of her thoughts.

"I wonder if Leonard will consider it necessary for me to trudge all that four miles of dusty, shadeless road to do homage to the people who are come to rule and reign in Aunt Hetty's old home?"

Gertrude is conscious of the shadow that passes over her face as she calls to mind the luxurious carriage, with its pair of thorough-bred horses, she has seen at the church-yard gates that morning, and she draws a mental picture of the Burges family driving home in it, then another picture of herself, toiling along the hilly way to the great house, overcome with fatigue, and sprinkled with the road-side dust.

Mrs. Thwaites is neither envious nor grasping in her disposition, neither ambitious nor avaricious in her desires, but oftentimes the incongruities of life perplex her; this does so now. At last she settles the question, as she does most others, by thinking she will leave Leonard to decide it. He shall say whether it is necessary for her to call at Grey Towers or not, for he is always a good judge of what is the right thing to do.

Sarah generally goes to church on Sunday afternoons; so on this day Mrs. Thwaites delights her children's hearts by saying they shall have their reading and scripture class out in the summer-house in the garden.

Not much of a summer-house that, after all! It is merely a small bower formed of rough branches intertwined together with a rustic seat and a table placed inside, merely a shady corner filched from the vegetable garden, narrow in extent, and limited in the view it commands.

But the glorious summer-time has taken the place in hand, and has decked it out with its own luxurious prodigality, and has scattered abundant traces of beauty even there. Climbing honeysuckles hang their trailing branches, laden with sweet-scented, creamy-tinted whorls of flowers. Clustering red and white roses mingle their gorgeous blooms with snowy jasmine, and make the bower a very temple of brightness and fragrance.

A pretty pastoral picture the children form as they gather in that summer-house. Lotty and baby keep each other quiet as they play with round stones and shells in one corner. Harry is perched on the seat, finding out the places in the books, while Lenny still lingers at the door, looking about him and listening.

"Come in, Lenny; it's time to begin our reading now."

"Oh, mamma, do let me hear the end of this lark's song; he's going higher and higher. Oh, I wish I was a lazy bird, with nothing to do but to sing all day long."

"I don't think birds are at all lazy, Lenny. Has it never struck you that they are very busy workers indeed?"

"How can that be, mamma? I am sure I never saw them doing anything."

Gertrude smiled as she replies.

"I expect they have finished most of their work long before either you or I are awake in the morning. They have to gather up their own meals, which are scattered here, there, and everywhere, and think what labour *that* must be, day after day. Then they must build their own nests. I read some time ago of a nuthatch, who took two months building a nest."

"Why was it so long as that?"

"Because the old wall in which it built had too large an aperture, and it plastered it up with mud and clay. Eleven pounds of clay were actually found, that the nuthatch had carried a hundred and fifty yards."

"I'm sure that bird wasn't lazy."

"Neither was a long-tailed titmouse I read of also. In that bird's nest were found no less than 2379 feathers of various sorts, though who counted them is more than I can tell you. Now, Lenny, take your place; Harry has found out our lesson, I see."

Phlegmatic Harry is not much of a questioner; but Lenny, of the big eyes and wondering brain, often pushes inquiries that would puzzle a student at the Cambridge examinations. As the reading goes on, the little man is sorely perplexed this afternoon that David should have been driven to take refuge in a gloomy cave, while Saul, his persecutor, dwelt in high places, and held rule over a great kingdom.

"I wonder God allowed *that*, mamma. David was much the best man, and should have had the most riches, and power, and honour."

"That is not the rule, Lenny; God does not always bestow the best earthly gifts on those He loves best. Perhaps to teach us we must never judge of a man's merit merely from his wealth and honour. When we get further on with David's history, we shall find *his* reward came in due time."

But Lenny's mind is not satisfied.

"God's people ought to be the richest, mamma, or how can they be happy? God gives true happiness to those who love Him; doesn't He?"

"Yes; but true happiness is not found in riches, Lenny. Many very wealthy men are truly miserable, while the lowly followers of Jesus, though they may be among the poorest on earth, are certainly the happiest, for their hearts are filled with peace and joy in believing."

"Papa is a good man; isn't he?"

"Now, Lenny, none of us are *good*; no, not one; for we are every one of us poor sinners in God's sight, till made pure through Christ's atonement for us. But I would fain *see you love* the Lord as your father does; try to walk in

his steps, my boy, and then you will know what true happiness is."

"Is papa as happy as Squire Burges?"

"I'm sure I hope so," replies Gertrude, wondering what is coming next.

"Oh! I am so glad of that, for this morning I thought the squire had the best of it, when I saw his horses that Ned Harris says cost more than three hundred pounds."

"What put that in your head, Lenny?"

"Why, when we were out with Sarah yesterday, Ned Harris told her Squire Burges was a grasping, greedy man who had cheated papa out of his share of Aunt Hetty's money."

"Hush! Lenny, hush! I must never have you repeat that again. Ned Harris was very unwise to talk in that way, particularly before children. I will speak to Sarah about it. Now let us go on with David's history; it is your turn to read, Harry."





CHAPTER VI.

LEONARD GIVES HIS OPINION.

THAT evening, in the soft cool twilight, Gertrude repeats this speech of Lenny's to her husband. They are pacing up and down the narrow pathway of the kitchen-garden, the perfume of the peas and beans, sage and lavender, mingled with the sweeter scents of rose and wall-flower, comes wafted to them on the summer air.

"I wonder whether such is the general opinion of the Eastown people about the squire and you," suggests Gertrude.

"I'm sure I hope not; such a report would sadly detract from the chances of Tom's usefulness and influence among his tenants here."

"Oh! I must confess I was not even thinking the squire could either be useful or influential. I never supposed *he* was the man to do much in that way," replies Mrs. Thwaites, with a slight *souppçon* of contempt in her tone.

"Why not, Gerty? He comes here as a landowner and employer. I hope he will try and do what he can among the people."

"Then I suppose you mean to be on terms with him? to call at Grey Towers, and all that sort of thing?"

"We will call there, of course, my dear. For many reasons I prefer holding out a friendly hand to Tom. But *our intercourse* is never likely to be either frequent or con-

genial. Will you go to Grey Towers with me one day next week?"

"Oh, Leonard; it is such a long way off. That four miles of dusty, hilly, scorching road will be a different thing to us to what it is to the Burges', with their carriage and horses."

"True, Gerty, the road *is* long and tedious, and I can't have my little wife wearing herself out on a pilgrimage to Grey Towers. So, on second thoughts, I'll go there first myself and take an apology for you. Do let us drop the 'disturbing element' from our conversation, and leave the Burges and their doings alone for the present. Are you too tired to take a turn by the reservoir with me this lovely evening?"

"No; I shall enjoy it very much," and her tone is bright again.

This reservoir Leonard mentions is a much-frequented retreat of the curate and his wife in the summer twilight. Though there is not much beauty in the place, it is quiet and secluded.

A deep, huge basin of water that supplies all Eastown with the needful fluid lies before them. Round this a smoothly-gravelled walk is laid out, fringed on the farther side by a wide flower border, now bright with many-coloured, sweet-scented blossoms. Beyond this again are high walls that, though they effectually keep out all view, except that of the calm sky above them, and strongly suggest the idea of a prison pleasure-ground, yet keep out at the same time all idle intruders; only those who hold the key of the place are allowed to enter there.

Many and many a time have Gertrude and Leonard paced to and fro that gravelled walk in earnest conversation when their day's work was done. Lowly as the place is, it is thronged with sweet memories to them.

Gertrude went there for her first walk when she came to the curate's house as a happy bride. The calm expanse of

waveless water as it reflects the passing clouds has been the mute witness to many of her moods of joy and sorrow, hope and depression.

Husband and wife have settled many of their plans, and held many consultations there ; and now, when the "disturbing element" (the Burges and their doings) is banished from the conversation—thoughts, words, and confidences flow on as hopefully as ever.

Eastown is essentially an ugly place, and the curate's house has the disadvantage of being in the ugliest part of it. For the sake of low rent and moderate taxes, of roomy apartments and many of them, Leonard and his wife are content to ignore the dinginess of the street, one side of which is formed by warehouses and high walls.

At the back of the house are timber-yards, gas-works, nursery-gardens, and the reservoir before mentioned. Not one atom of loveliness or poetry can be extracted from the whole neighbourhood ; it is hopelessly common-place, dull, and uninteresting.

No poetry do I say? Ah! there are living poems and deep passionate experiences in the lives and doings of the crowded inhabitants of Eastown that Leonard Thwaites knows well.

There is hardly a home in the whole place but he is familiar with its circumstances and surroundings. He knows where the aching hearts, the sleepless eyes, the complaints of sorrow, and the low murmurs of despondency are, and he is to be found in these places with words of comfort and consolation. Hardly a man or woman in the whole place but turns to him for advice and sympathy.

Gertrude sometimes found fault with the dull street in the early part of her married life, but now she never has time even to think about it. Her hands and thoughts are full to overflowing with the caring for her large family, and with the thousand and one duties that ever fall into the lot of a *right-thinking*, earnest, energetic pastor's wife.

"Besides, who can be dull where Leonard is?" she laughingly asks. "His mind has never become cramped or fettered by uncongenial surroundings, and why should I complain?"

Gertrude has the truest, deepest love for her husband—one might almost say there is reverence in her attachment, mingled as it is with perfect affection. Leonard sometimes appears only a grave, pre-occupied, thoughtful man to the mere outer world, but she knows what a bright, sunshiny nature lives in his heart, and what precious little traits of tender softness there are hidden away under his gravity.

She is ever ready to confess his superiority to herself, and is content to look up to him with undoubted trust, holding his opinion as the right one, his judgment as without a flaw. Some may call her too partial perhaps, or blind even to her husband's failings; but she has no desire to be more clear-sighted, and goes on holding her opinion still.

After all, there are few men like Leonard Thwaites is, both as husband and pastor. We all know Gertrude's testimony of him as the former, and the voice of his people would be nearly as energetic in praise of him as the latter, for they all love him.

Not less is he zealous in his sacred calling that so many of his thoughts must of necessity be given to the prosaic, ever-returning cares of his family—for scanty means bring many cares. But he has a way of looking beyond and above the mere events of time to a goal that is as unchanging and glorious as all below is shifting and anxious and unsatisfying. Gertrude is apt to grow desponding at times, but rare are the occasions when it may not be said of Leonard—

"The heart that trusts for ever sings,
And feels as light as it had wings:
A well of peace within it springs,
Come good or ill;
Whate'er to-day, to-morrow brings,
It is God's will."



CHAPTER VII.

THE VISIT TO GREY TOWERS.

A FEW days afterwards Leonard goes to call on the new squire. Gertrude has protested against wending her weary way up the hills and along the dusty road, and ere long her husband thinks she was quite right, and is heartily glad she has remained at home, for even *he* feels oppressed with the fervid heat and glare of that July day. True, his progress along the road has been anything but straight walking, for he has diverged from the beaten track more than once to visit some of his people whose homes lie along his route.

Now he leaps over a stile to call on Farmer Hunt, down at the Meadow farm, and that is fully a mile out of his way. Again, he has gone down to Nance Hunter's cottage in the valley, nearly as far off in another direction. He has stopped half an hour to read to the old woman, who has been bed-ridden these two years, and who ever looks on her pastor's visits as bright spots in her very dreary life.

These and sundry other calls of the like nature make the journey long and tedious; the heat, almost tropical, is nearly as much as he can bear; so it is like plunging into another atmosphere when at last Leonard reaches the lane leading direct to the house.

There the trees nearly meet over his head; the long *sweep of grassy pasture* sloping down to the brink of the

cool river refreshes his eyes and calms his brow. Still, he is very tired and very sun-scorched when, just at noon-day, he passes through the lodge-gates of Grey Towers.

It will be false to say he is altogether unmoved as he goes in and once more treads the familiar pathway round the lawn, and looks up at the grand old trees under which so many of his bygone hours were passed. What volumes and volumes he has read through while seated on that very bench beneath that old wych elm! and how often he has turned away from the printed pages to read the varying ones of nature, and to watch the varied effects of light and shade in the dancing leaves of the long drooping branches.

Yonder picturesque giant of a beech was a favourite tree of his also in those days. Time has not changed it much. The grey bark is still gilded and tinted with lichens—the high-growing roots, with their velvety cushions of soft green moss, form just such inviting seats as ever.

Squire Burges has not yet banished the old timber from the place, and for this Leonard in his heart thanks him; but he soon discovers most other once familiar objects have altogether vanished from sight. The interior of the house is marvellously altered—furniture, pictures, carpets, ornaments, painting and gilding have changed the very character of the place. The curate can hardly recognize Aunt Hetty's once sombre-looking house.

As he walks through the hall, mounts the broad staircase, and enters the drawing-room, the door of which is thrown open by a footman in gorgeous livery, he is conscious of a confused flush of brilliant colouring, a succession of heaped-up luxuries.

Leonard looks round him with amaze as at some grand transformation scene. The old place has cast off its dingy hues and lurking shadows, and beams forth like a blooming bride in all the freshness of radiant beauty.

Stately mirrors reflect back glittering ornaments, books with rich bindings shine forth from the tables, banner-

screens and various embroidered things proclaim the skill of feminine fingers, silk and lace curtains shade the windows, dainty vases, costly upholstery, stands of rare exotics, and groups of fragrant blossoms meet his gaze.

Surely there is enough here to please and satisfy his eye. Leonard notes it all dreamily—he is trying to recognize the old rooms where so many of his days have been spent. Once every nook and corner of the house was familiar to him — a thousand pleasant recollections endear Grey Towers to his memory ; but now all seems new and foreign.

He even sighs over the change, for he recollects many other things besides mere outward adornments have altered also. He is a stranger now where once he was a loved and welcome inmate.

His reverie is brought to an end by Tom Burges coming quickly into the room with outstretched hand,—

“Ha, Thwaites ! they told me you were here, and 'pon my word I'm glad to see you. You had no end of courage, though, to walk all the way from Eastown on this broiling morning.”

“It *was* sultry coming along the road the first part of my journey ; but over here, below the hill, you seem cool and pleasant enough. I should say there are some degrees of difference in the temperature.”

“No doubt, no doubt ! the country is better wooded on this side, and the view of the river refreshes one, I think. You'll stop to luncheon with us, I hope ? My wife will be in presently.”

While Tom talks rapidly on, Leonard Thwaites has time to look at him, and he thinks time has dealt very leniently with his outward appearance.

True, he has grown a trifle stouter and a great deal balder, but there is the same hard, ruddy face, the same plentiful crop of bushy, tawny whiskers, the same keen, restless, deep-set eyes, and the same quick nervous manner of former *days*.

The squire is perfectly well dressed in the newest and most fashionably-cut suit of light country costumes—his chain is massive, his diamond rings large and valuable.

Leonard fumbles in his pocket, and presently brings out his wife's visiting-card—that convenient, magic paste-board representative that is supposed to count as a visit in society.

"Gertrude could not attempt the long walk here. You and Mrs. Burges must excuse her calling while the weather is so oppressive."

"To be sure, my dear fellow! By-the-bye, we must see about getting Mrs. Thwaites here without giving her the trouble to *walk* such a distance. I'll speak to my wife about it. But here she comes to answer for herself."

Nothing can exceed the squire's urbanity. He can well afford to be gracious in his manner to his kinsman now. If there is a slight gleam of triumph in his keen, clear eye, Leonard at any rate does not in the least detect it.

Mrs. Burges sweeps into the room with all the fuss and rustle of rich new attire. Her dress is a little too fine for morning wear, but she is all too inexperienced of fashionable life at present to be aware of that.

She welcomes Leonard graciously, and warmly seconds Tom's invitation to luncheon.

"When will it be ready, Hannah?" asks her husband.

"The bell will ring in about half an hour."

"All right, then. Thwaites, if you have no objection, we'll have a look about the place. Should you like to see my stables and dairies?"

"Very much; no doubt you have made many alterations."

"You may well say that," remarks Mrs. Burges with a laugh; "Tom makes a perfect hobby of his improvements and inventions. I tell him I'm sure he dreams about them, for they're never out of his head for long together."

"Well, I like that, Hannah; you care quite as much about having things nice as I do myself."

"But mine is in-door work, and I don't meddle with your horses and stables."

Tom and the squire go out together, and are soon deeply engrossed in examination of the new buildings that with large doors, ground-glass casements, and airy stalls, lodge the squire's horses in most luxurious fashion.

They look at the model dairies, admire the marble shelves, and glazed tile floorings, glance at the pans of milk, golden with their wealth of cream, and pause before the pats of butter that repose, fresh and cool, on the marble slabs.

Tom shows his guest about in a grand, explanatory, off-hand sort of way, that considering the relative position of the two men is rather amusing—at least it might have been so to a looker-on, but Leonard, in his dreamy way, does not see half Tom shows him, for he is looking about for old familiar things, the faintest vestiges of which are more admired by him than all the new improvements, for he sees them through the dim veil of memories his presence in the old place wakens up.

Tom elects to ignore Leonard's former interest in Grey Towers. For any allusion he makes, he might have been the greatest stranger from some distant part of the earth come there to look at it for the first time. And yet by relationship, Leonard has by far the best right to possession, and once he had a greater prospect of being owner of the place than Tom himself.

At length the luncheon bell rings out, proclaiming to the neighbourhood, by its loud tones, the squire's family are going to eat and drink. Tom and Leonard hear the sound also, and turn their steps towards the house, rather to the relief of the latter, who has felt much more pain than pleasure in reviewing scenes that are at once so familiar and yet so strange to him.



Leonard asleep with little Lotty.—Page 47.



CHAPTER VIII.

AN INVITATION.

T is late in the afternoon when at last the curate reaches home. Gertrude, the very first spare moment she can get, runs to the study, hoping to have a full and particular account of his visit to Grey Towers.

But the scene that meets her eyes makes her pause at the door, then creep noiselessly into the room.

Leonard is fast asleep in his arm-chair, his head thrown back in an uneasy position, his whole attitude that of a man who is fairly worn out with weariness of mind and body.

Lotty, his favourite companion, and "study kitten," as he is wont to call her, is lying in his arms in a sound slumber also. Her rich masses of sunny curls are clustering like floss silk on his shoulder ; her sweet, calm, pink face looks like a very rose-bud as it nestles against his black coat.

Gertrude, with a soundless step, goes over to the open window, the air from which is swaying the curtain to and fro behind Leonard's head with a dangerous draught ; she closes it gently, draws down the blind to shut out the slanting rays of the setting sun, and then quietly stands contemplating the group.

Her husband looks very pale ; there are deep lines on his brow she has not noticed before, and there is an expression of anxiety in his countenance that touches Gertrude's very heart.

"I ought to have gone to Grey Towers with him," muses

she. "What a selfish creature I was to shrink from encountering the mere fatigue, when I might have kept him from feeling the going there so much ! Of course it was a trial to him to see the dear old place under such circumstances—he, a mere stranger in what was once a well-loved home. Poor old fellow ! how it must have half broken his heart ; mere bodily fatigue would never make him sleep like that."

Then with a low sigh, Gertrude slips out of the room, and leaves the sleeping pair to their repose.

The intense heat and closeness of the weather culminates at length in a heavy thunder-storm. In the evening Mrs. Thwaites sits with her work at a small round table near the dining-room window, and tries to set in her stitches despite the fast gathering darkness. The rain comes down in torrents, forming miniature inky rivulets in the dirty street outside.

Presently Leonard comes in from the study, still looking pale and weary.

"I've shut up my books, Gerty ; for I find my head won't stand much study this evening."

"What can be the matter with you ?" asked Gertrude quickly.

"Nothing much, I believe ; perhaps I have been feeling the effects of the coming thunder-storm."

He draws a chair near the round table and watches the dreary splash of the rain outside.

"This rain will do a great deal of good. Burges was telling me this morning the ground is all cracked and broken into fissures with the intense dryness. By-the-bye, I have a note in my pocket for you, Gerty."

"For me ! Who is it from ?"

"It is merely an invitation from Mrs. Burges ; she wants us to dine at Grey Towers to-morrow week."

"Oh, Leonard ! need we go there ?"

"I half accepted the invitation, Gerty. Mrs. Burges was so overwhelmingly pressing—but of course if you really have

any great objection to going, the remedy is in your own hands—you can decline for us both."

"It isn't that I altogether object, Leonard, but it seems so strange to be on visiting terms there. I verily believe all Eastown had decided you and Tom Burges were to be mortal foes. Everybody here says it was all by trickery he got Aunt Hetty to make that odious will in his own favour, to the exclusion of Ralph and yourself."

"Strange how a rumour of that sort takes root and spreads."

"But if it is *not* a rumour, Leonard—but a real, positive fact, oughtn't you to show some resentment about it? People here say Aunt Hetty's own maid was a paid spy in Tom's service, and that every single thing that went on at Grey Towers or Eastown, was reported to him during Mrs. Burges last years. Did Tom say much about her, or her strange will, this morning?"

"Aunt Hetty's name was never once mentioned, and mind you, Gertrude, I don't think Tom considers the will at all a strange one. He is perfectly satisfied with it, and accepts his inheritance as a right."

"Satisfied! I should think he is satisfied, now he has got all he has been scheming for," exclaims Gertrude in an indignant tone of voice, and with a very visible flashing of her brown eyes.

"Now don't get angry, little woman! We shall never know the true state of the case, I suppose—so it behoves us not to be prejudiced by these reports that after all may be but the hatching of some mischievous minds. For myself I dare not be actuated either by malice or envy towards Tom; nay, I would not encourage those hateful feelings in my heart towards him for ten times the value of Grey Towers."

Mrs. Thwaites breaks off her cotton with a jerk, and tries to thread her needle in the dim twilight, to the great danger of spoiling her sight—but she does not reply—and presently the curate adds,—

"The more I consider the case the more I am convinced

that it is clearly my duty to meet present circumstances with the spirit of charity that 'hopeth all things, endureth all things, and never faileth.'"

"I believe you are right after all, Leonard," replies his wife meekly, as she folds up her work, having fairly given up trying to sew in the dark.

"I think so, Gerty, and I am glad you agree with me."

"Did you hear any news at Grey Towers? What was Tom talking about?"

"His chief topic of conversation, apart from his own affairs, was about our non-resident rector."

"Does he know Mr. Gurling?"

"No, but he seems well acquainted with his doings, and he was very energetic in condemning him for living away from his parish. He said it was too bad for him to draw all the income and leave me all the work."

"Ah! that is an old grievance, Leonard. What did you say?"

"I told him Mr. Gurling enjoys better health at Cannes than in England, and I said he visited Eastown every year and spends a couple of months here. But both Tom and Sir Stanley West agreed that a parish cannot be worked properly in the absence of its rector. I could not gainsay *that* opinion, you know."

"That was rather hard on you, the curate of the parish, Leonard!"

Mr. Thwaites shrugs his shoulders slightly, and goes on. He knows Gertrude loves a gossip, so he tells her what he remembers of the conversation.

"Sir Stanley particularly lamented the ineffectual clerical provision for the place, he even hinted the work could not be rightly done."

"Just like Sir Stanley's coarseness and want of tact. I suppose he was as rude as he can be to you, Leonard?"

"Oh! no, Gerty, he was remarkably civil—scrupulously so, except in regard to the hit at me I have just mentioned."

"I was not aware he was on such friendly terms at Grey Towers."

"Yes, he seems quite at home there. He called in at luncheon time, and I left him there when I came away."

"This the first time you have encountered him since *that* affair, isn't it, Leonard?"

"Yes, he has carefully avoided me hitherto, and even taken great trouble in doing so."

Here the entrance of Sarah, bearing the supper tray, put a stop to further conversation on the subject, so it is right to explain the "affair" to which Gertrude alluded was a sad village scandal, that happened a short time before Sir Stanley's wife died, and in which the Baronet had been very prominently mixed up.

The curate gave him his opinion on that occasion with such undisguised truth and energy, that Sir Stanley, glowing all over with rage, had exclaimed in high passion,—

"You forget whom you are speaking to, sir! Perhaps you imagine you are lecturing one of your clod-hopping congregation who is bound to listen to you."

But Mr. Thwaites had answered calmly,—

"I don't in the least forget who you are, Sir Stanley West. I remember you are a Baronet, and that is all the more reason why you should act as a gentleman."

This had enraged Sir Stanley beyond all bounds—for conscience will make cowards of the guilty, who often fume and bluster to hide their conviction of error. He withdrew himself and his people from attendance at Eastown Church, and went any distance rather than meet Leonard, whom he henceforth denominated as "That prig of a parson."

One good thing, however. The scandal was brought to a sudden stop, and since the time it had happened the Baronet had never come in contact with the "parson" who had not hesitated to speak out the truth boldly.

Strange their first interview should have taken place under the roof of Grey Towers!



CHAPTER IX.

THE SQUIRE'S WIFE ENTERTAINS COMPANY.

GERTRUDE makes no further objection about going to Grey Towers. In her spare moments, which are not many, she busies herself in making the needful preparations for so important a visit.

She has an innate sense of the fitness of things, and will not on any account appear at the dinner table in apparel unsuited to the occasion. Her wardrobe has of late fallen into that indescribable state of fadedness and scantiness, meagreness and poverty, a limited income and large family are so apt to bring about.

It even causes Gertrude some mental perplexity before she can find out whether she has anything fit to wear.

At last she remembers a pale grey dress, bought a bargain a couple of years ago, but which has never been made up, from its being considered fragile and unserviceable in texture, and delicate and ephemeral in tint.

This is now brought out from its folds of tissue paper, cut out and fashioned by her own fingers into a very pretty, becoming, modern-looking dress.

When the day arrives, and she puts her dress on, and adds to her adornment a set of pink coral ornaments, she seems a vision of splendour to her boys.

Greater still is the delight of Harry and Lenny when the *squire's* carriage, with its two prancing horses, stands before

their door in the dingy street, and when papa and mamma get in, and are whirled away out of sight.

It is all like a fairy tale to Lenny. He conjures up visions of the wonderful scenes of grandeur and bliss that must await them at Grey Towers, and he vainly entreats Sarah to let him stay up that he may see the carriage bring them back again.

Mrs. Burges has said in her note they are to be "quite alone"—merely a "family party;" but in reality she makes great preparations, and invites several guests.

It is her first formal entertainment since she has been mistress there; and to say the lady of the house is anxious and excited, will be to describe her feelings in very mild terms indeed.

Sir Stanley West has promised to come, and so have half-a-dozen others of their neighbours—county people who are accustomed to "good style," Mrs. Burges says.

So all the capabilities of Grey Towers are put in requisition. The dinner is to be a marvel of gastronomic triumph, and the greatest puzzle to poor Mrs. Burges has been to learn the names of the fine French dishes, the "entrées" and "entremets."

Like many other people who have grown rich and risen in the social scale late in life, Mrs. Burges does not take gracefully to her advancement in the world, but has brought a great deal of fuss and fluster with her into her altered position.

Although her possessions have enlarged so considerably, her nature has not enlarged in proportion. In many ways glimpses and hints of old manners and habits will crop up to the surface, despite her endeavours.

The dinner-table is laid out with bright new plate fresh from the shop. The glass is the finest modern cut crystal, and flowers and ferns light up the scene with grace and beauty.

Mrs. Burges watches for the temporary absence of the

footman from the room, and then runs in to take a critical survey of the preparations.

"Nothing can be grander or more elaborate than this!" is her delighted comment as she glances up and down the table.

"To think I should be giving a dinner party in this style. I wonder what the Grey's and Somer's out at Kingston would say if they could only take a peep here just now? I'm sure even Sir Stanley West and the county people couldn't have it nicer in their own houses."

Then lifting up her eyes to take another look she glances out of the window and sees to her amazement Alice and her two youngest brothers coming slowly up the fields, laughing and talking, and bearing great burdens of reeds and wild flowers in their baskets.

Alice, whom she believes to be at that moment shut up in her room upstairs with Laura, her maid, dressing her, and trying to make her look her best at the dinner party!

"It is altogether too tiresome of Alice. She requires watching just like a child," exclaims Mrs. Burges as she goes to the hall door to meet her with a quick reproof.

"How silly you are, Alice! Here you have been running and tearing about in the blazing heat till your face is all burnt and scorched like a gipsy's. Why didn't you keep quiet in your room this afternoon?"

"Because the boys asked me to go out with them, mamma. We've had such a charming run down in the fields by the river's side."

"You seem quite to forget we're having a dinner party this evening, Alice. You'll look a perfect fright with your flushed cheeks," exclaims her mother, giving her a look of angry scrutiny.

"Oh, no, mamma! I didn't forget. I've left myself a good half-hour for dressing," and Alice gives her basket of flowers to Victor, and runs through the hall and up the



Mrs. Burges follows with a more stately step ; her rich apple-green dress and lace flounces training behind, and her dead-gold ornaments flashing a subdued light as she enters her daughter's room to continue her vexed remonstrance.

Laura is speedily summoned to attend to her duties, and has many charges given her to see all is properly done.

Ere long Alice emerges from her room again in a pretty white dress, and with her hair in a thick glossy coil round her head. Her pulses are toned down now, and the flush has died out of her cheeks.

She looks very unlike the young hoyden who has so lately called forth the maternal reproof.

"Will I do now, mamma?" asks she in a subdued tone.

"Yes, pretty well, child;" and Mrs. Burges lets her eyes rest for a moment with gratified pride on the young girl who stands before her.

"Alice, love, I don't like that white geranium in your hair. Real flowers are *so* paltry, and look faded and poor so soon. Go and put in the handsome pearl comb I bought you; it will just suit your dress. Make haste, child; I see Sir Stanley West coming in at the gates."

Alice, who has her own theory about "real flowers," does not argue the point; she only says, as she is leaving the room, "Oh, mamma, is Sir Stanley coming here again so soon?"

"Can't you see he is, Alice? and very kind and polite of him, too. A man who has engagements without number like he has shows great friendliness in accepting our invitations."

Mrs. Burges speaks out impatiently, for Alice is the only one of the family not duly impressed with the Baronet's wonderful good nature; neither can she be brought to sound his praises as the others do.

At this period of their acquaintance she merely looks on him as a rather tiresome, middle-aged man, full of prejudices and contradictions. He provokes her at times with

his familiarity, awes her with his pompous manner, and sometimes shocks her with his out-spoken opinions.

A man whom she would instinctively avoid, or treat with utter indifference if he will only allow her to follow her inclination ; but of late he has made a point of being extremely attentive to her, and treats her with a conspicuous deference that greatly annoys her.

Alice cannot understand his manner in the least. She has not yet even suspected the dreams of ambition the Baronet's attentions are already arousing in the minds of other members of her family. They, at any rate, have already begun to understand the attraction that lures him so often to Grey Towers.

If Mrs. Burges can altogether divest herself of anxiety about her entertainment she will see that everything is proving a success. The dinner is well served, and conversation goes on with a soft pleasant murmur round the table.

But the feeling of old days is still clinging to her, and she cannot throw it aside.

Formerly, on the rare occasions when they had company at the little villa at Kingston, every dish, every preparation was due to the manipulation of her own skilful fingers.

She knew the number of eggs in the custard, the secret of the patties, tarts, and jellies.

So now she thinks more about the dinner than she need. She forgets the head cook is the responsible person, and she watches the serving with a flushed face and anxious eye, too eager even to notice the murmur of talk that is going on round her.

Leonard sits next the Rector of Stopeley—an old college friend of his, and they are soon deep in conversation. Books—dear to both of them—are discussed with interest ; University chums are inquired after, and Leonard is surprised to find how many of his old companions—long lost sight of—have found their way to the front rank, and are doing good action in the world's battle-field.

Their names are heard of now linked with some deed or work of note.

"Whilst I have been vegetating down here at Eastown," remarks Leonard, smiling.

Smiling, though he recollects *he* also once hoped great things for himself that never came to pass ; smiling, though he recalls to his memory how sadly and tamely his hopes have toned down.

His circle is narrowed now. Instead of finding himself known to fame he is merely a hard-worked curate, forgotten or little cared for by the great world, yet striving with his whole heart to be useful in his day and generation for his Master's sake.

Leonard's life is not an idle one. No fear of his mind rusting through inaction. He has too much intellectual employment ; too much work in his parish, and too many family ties for anything of that sort.

In his own earnest way he is making "footprints" as deep as those his old college chums are making, and that are firmer and more enduring than those planted in the "sands of time."

Sir Stanley West talks to the squire, while his eyes industriously follow every look or stir of Alice's. Gertrude, who feels far more inclined to sit quietly, than to take a prominent part in the conversation going on round her, hears scraps and snatches of what Tom is saying.

He has already taken up the "rôle" of a man of substance, talks largely of *my* horses, *my* carriages, *my* crops, *my* tenants, *my* improvements. Sir Stanley seems to be quizzically humouring his brag for a purpose of his own, drawing him out, to amuse himself, Gertrude thinks.

After dinner, when the ladies are entertaining each other in the drawing-rooms, Alice goes over to the curate's wife and shyly seats herself beside her on the sofa.

"Do you think Grey Towers much altered?" asks she.

"I was never here till to-day," replies Gertrude, with a smile.

She likes the fair face of the young girl with its thoughtful expression and half-veiled look of sadness, and has caught herself wondering more than once how father and daughter can be so utterly unlike each other—cast, as it were, in altogether such different moulds.

"Ah, I forgot!" exclaims Alice, in some confusion, as she recollects the history she has heard of Aunt Hetty's obstinate objection to Leonard's marriage with the fortuneless Miss Ashton.

"I think Grey Towers extremely pretty, and much more genial and home-like than I had pictured it. One generally forms some opinion of a place they have never entered, and I quite made up my mind this house must be very old-fashioned and very gloomy," continues Gertrude, as she glances back at the large, handsomely furnished rooms.

The soft light from wax candles is mingling faintly with the fading rays of sunset; and the rooms, which in broad daylight may be condemned by artistic taste as having too gorgeous and too varied a display of colours, are now mellowed down to an harmonious softness of tints.

Alice glances round the room as Gertrude has done.

"Yes, I think the rooms may be called 'pretty;' but it is the kind of prettiness one meets with anywhere. They are like a piece of the Crystal Palace, and a bit of the show-places at Hunt's and Storr's, all mingled up together. There are rooms in this house I like far better than the drawing-rooms."

"The library, I suppose?" suggests Gertrude.

"Oh yes, I like the library. It is all done up with dark oak and cool green velvet. But the room I prefer to all others is in the East Tower. Oh! it is such a quaint, dear little nook. Some of Aunt Hetty's old, old things that must have belonged to her great, great grandmother before her, have been put there. The rich silk-flowered and

embroidered curtains are splendid ; and there are gems of cabinets, and such nice slender, painted chairs. I wish there was light enough, I would take you there now and show you everything. Will you come to Grey Towers some morning and go over the place with me ?”

“Thank you. You are very kind,” replies Gertrude hesitatingly.

“Would you like to see the garden, Mrs. Thwaites ? There is still light enough to take a peep there.”

“I should like it very much.”

“Then come with me. There’s a way through the conservatory. The steps take us to the upper terrace.”

The curate’s wife follows her new friend through the well-filled greenhouse the squire has lately erected. They pause now and then to notice some of the plants, and soon find themselves beyond the sound of the low voices of the guests, and out in the soft, still air of the summer’s evening.





CHAPTER X.

ALICE BURGES' CONFIDENCES.

THE pleasant breeze sweeps past them laden with odours from heliotrope, honeysuckle and jasmine. Flowers in profusion are everywhere. Pyramids of pillar roses, all a mass of blossom, ribbon beds in a perfect flush of colour. Gertrude looks round her with delight.

"What multitudes of sweet flowers! You must enjoy this place very much, Miss Burges."

"I do enjoy it ; but you will think me very hard to please when I tell you there are places in the garden more to my taste than this. Here, the very profusion of colours bewilders one, but I could show you shady nooks and retired spots where you might fancy yourself miles away from any human habitation. I wish we had more light, we should hardly see anything down there now."

"I'm afraid not, the twilight is coming on rapidly."

"Well, some other time I will take you down to the ferneries, and banks, and tangles. Ralph always liked the lower garden best. Do you know Ralph Burges, Mrs. Thwaites?"

"No, I never saw him ; but my husband and he are old friends, and very attached ones too. He is a near relative of yours, I believe?"

"Oh, no, not at all a near one. There is a mere family link between us, that is all."

"Where is Mr. Ralph Burges now?" asks Gertrude.

She turns towards Alice, who is standing quite still, looking dreamily down the garden, over which shadows are beginning to gather.

"I wish I knew, Mrs. Thwaites. Oh! I wish I knew where he is," exclaims the girl eagerly. "I hoped you could give me some tidings about him. We never hear from him now; and perhaps he is dead and buried out in some lonely foreign place."

"I trust not, Miss Burges—that would indeed be a sad fate for him."

"His life has been all sadness, I think; and oh! he deserves a far better lot. There is not one in the whole wide world as good, and noble, and unselfish as poor Ralph."

Alice lays her hand on Mrs. Thwaites' arm, and the curate's wife looks at her companion with surprise. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips quivering, her eyes full of large tears that have gathered, and are just ready to overflow their bounds and burst forth.

"If this is mere friendship for Ralph Burges, its signs are of a remarkably demonstrative character."

"I suppose you know him very intimately, Miss Burges?"

"Call me Alice, please, and then I will tell you."

"I will gladly call you Alice, my dear child, if you wish me to do so."

Miss Burges slips her hand within Gertrude's arm, and draws her gently away into the shadow of some acacia trees near, and there they stand, their light dresses hidden in the leafy gloom.

Little did Gertrude once imagine she could ever take real interest in any one member of Tom's family, yet now she stands arm in arm with his daughter, her head bent to catch her whispers, and her whole heart full of sympathy for the poor girl's sorrow.

Not all at once did the sentences come out; there were

tears and pauses between, mingled with soothings and words of comfort from Gertrude.

"He stayed at our house months at a time, Mrs. Thwaites, and I was engaged to him for a whole year. Oh ! what a happy precious year it was, and we looked forward to being married some day, for both my mother and father approved of our engagement then."

"Have you heard from Ralph since Aunt Hetty's death, Alice ?"

"Never once ; but he came to England some months before it happened, on purpose to try and be reconciled to her. Papa was staying at Grey Towers at the time, and, of course, did all he could to act as mediator between them, but did not succeed."

Gertrude has her own opinion about the kind of mediator Tom was likely to make, but she does not express her thought aloud ; she only says :—

"That was a great pity."

"Oh, it *was* a pity, Mrs. Thwaites. Things might have turned out so differently had they been reconciled. Since papa has had Grey Towers left to him, poor Ralph seems to have dropped out of our world. I never hear his name mentioned ; I dare not speak of him. No letters ever come from him. Everything about him seems a blank, a silent, awful blank."

The quick tears have burst their bounds now, and Alice weeps bitterly, as she clings to Gertrude's arm, and yields herself to an agony of grief.

The curate's wife looks on, much moved, but sorely puzzled what to do.

At last Alice rouses herself.

"If your husband should ever hear from my poor Ralph, will you promise to let me know, Mrs. Thwaites ? And if he should ever find out where he is, and write to him, will you ask him to say I have never once changed towards him, and that I trust him still."

"We must talk of this again, Alice. I'm quite sure Leonard does not know where Ralph is at present. Don't give way to despair, my dear child ; remember the ordering of these things lies in far wiser hands than ours. Trust more to Him, Alice ; He knows best what is good for us."

"Oh ! I am sure of that, Mrs. Thwaites, though I can't feel it is so sometimes. It seems so hard not to know whether my poor Ralph is living or dead. I can't sleep at night for thinking and wondering about it."

Steps are now heard coming near, and Alice hastily dries up her tears as Sir Stanley and her brother are seen making their way towards them.

"The odious man !" exclaims Alice softly, as that worthy comes up towards them with a light laugh.

"Found at last ! how frightfully selfish of you ladies to hide yourselves in this way ! Philip and I have been all over the lower garden looking for you."

"I thought we were sure to find you in some of Alice's pet retreats," adds her brother.

"Let us go down to the wilderness again. We shall just be in time to startle the fays and fairies who are said to come out and dance in the moonlight," suggests Sir Stanley, as he bends down towards Alice.

But the young lady says it is too late, and it is time to return to the house, so they all go in through the now lighted conservatory together.

A little music, a little more conversation, and the guests begin to depart. Sir Stanley lingers behind to settle about riding over to Slopeley to-morrow with the squire and Philip.

Then the footman announces the carriage is ready for Mr. Thwaites.

Alice, who seems to have overcome her emotion by this time, runs down to the carriage just as Leonard and his wife are seated in it.

She holds a moss-covered basket in her hand, full of ripe fruit.

"I have brought these for your children, Mrs. Thwaites ; a peach and a nectarine for each of them. Will you say I sent them with my love ? "

"Thank you very much, Alice ; how kind and thoughtful of you."

Squire Burges comes forward at the moment, and peers into the basket with surprise, mingled with some curiosity, and with a great deal of displeasure.

How dare Alice take on herself to dispose of the very best of his peaches without asking him ? Though there are quantities more in his houses, he has no notion of their being given away like that.

"I'll give Miss Alice my opinion pretty freely, presently," thinks he, as he still looks grudgingly into the basket ; then he says aloud—

"Capital peaches these, Mrs. Thwaites ; you don't eat the like of them every day ; why, I'll be bound they'd fetch six or seven shillings a dozen in Covent Garden Market."

The abruptness and brusqueness of his tone startles Gertrude, and she sees at once what it means.

"Send them to Covent Garden, then, for I want none of your fruit," is the thought that rushes into her heart as she detects Tom's greediness and displeasure.

The little present is robbed of all its charm by his speech and manner, but if any impatient retort rises to Gertrude's lips, it dies away unuttered, when she meets Alice's troubled eyes lifted with a look of pathetic appeal to her face.

Mrs. Thwaites recovers herself at once, and smiles her adieus, and holds out her hand for a friendly clasp to Alice, ere the carriage drives away.

It is very luxurious that driving home through the cool lanes on that soft summer's evening. The stars sparkle down on them from the quiet blue sky, and everything looks calm and peaceful.

But Gertrude, strange to say, hardly notices this, hardly *feels she is enjoying her pleasant drive*, hardly thinks of the

grand entertainment they have shared. Her whole mind is taken up with the glimpse of family history Alice Burges has unfolded to her.

"You are very quiet, little wife; are you tired?"

"No, Leonard, but I was thinking of Alice Burges; I fear there is much trouble in store for her. Tom will never let her marry Ralph Burges now."

And then Gertrude tells her husband the little love story that has been whispered to her under the shadow of the acacia trees. Wifelike, she believes telling her husband is no breach of confidence—she has never yet been able to keep a secret from him.

"I suspect Tom has already formed different views for his daughter's future."

"How do you mean, Leonard?"

"I think he means Sir Stanley West to marry her."

"Surely you are mistaken!—Sir Stanley's first wife has only been dead a short time—poor heart-broken, unhappy creature she was."

Leonard reckons up the time.

"Lady West has been dead a year, Gerty. She died just this time last summer, you recollect!"

"So she did! Well, if Alice is to marry *that* man, I pity her more than ever. But I do hope she is not doomed to be the second Lady West!"

"I hope not either—I may be mistaken in my surmise—Alice seems a nice, unaffected girl, a little like our Katie."

"But Katie is so much younger, Leonard!"

"True, my dear, but the likeness is there all the same; I noticed it both in feature and expression, she made me think of Katie more than once. I wonder when we shall see our child again? Sometimes I think we are doing wrong in letting her grow up such a stranger to us!"

Leonard has often said this before, and Gertrude's reply has generally been much the same as now.

"But it is for her good, Leonard, and we must make a little sacrifice of our feeling in the matter. Remember we could never afford to give her the education her godmother provides for her. Why, it would take more than half our income to keep Katie at Madame Denton's school!"

"So it would, Gerty, but wouldn't a plainer education do for our child? Now don't think I'm ungrateful to Miss Hay for being such a friend to our 'little one,' but I feel tempted to wish Katie was more under the home-rule, and was more one of the home-circle."

This subject is one that often gives Leonard many misgivings, he feels Katie is growing up a positive stranger to them, with hopes, and ways, and ideas, all formed in an entirely different groove to theirs.

True, her letters are full of loving messages, full of wishes for a speedy meeting, but two long years have drifted away since she was last at home.

Her very disposition is getting unknown to them now, for two years bring changes to the heart as well as to the body, and at Katie's age the changes become very evident.

News of music prizes, French prizes, German and other prizes, from time to time reach home; tokens of Katie's skill and attention, but Leonard values these accomplishments at their true estimate.

He often questions whether less of these things, and more of the guidance of the maternal eye, more of the teaching of the maternal counsel would not be better for her. He would be sure then religion was made the very foundation of the structure, and what were all accomplishments, what was all learning worth without *that* for its basis?

"I would rather have my child good than clever, I would rather have the grace of God in her heart than all the wisdom the world can give her," has been his speech to Gertrude—and then the carriage rattles up through the rough streets of Eastown, and finally stops at their own door.



CHAPTER XI.

A TRYING WINTER.

AFTER this dinner party at Grey Towers, things settle down into their usual quietness in the curate's house. It soon becomes very evident no great intimacy will ever be kept up between his lowly household and the very imposing establishment over which Squire Burges rules.

Leonard has not the slightest wish for frequent intercourse, he and Tom are not more likely to be of one mind now any more than they had been in the days of old.

Now the curate has once shown there is no enmity in his heart towards the fortunate possessor of Aunt Hetty's wealth, he is quite content to make no further demonstration. He goes on his way undisturbed by the reports that reach him of the grand doings at Grey Towers.

People say Tom must have brought a fine fortune of his own into the estate, or even Aunt Hetty's hoarded riches will not stand the immense outlay.

The squire has taken the reins with a high hand, there is no doubt about that. No expense is spared to place Grey Towers on a footing with the houses of the county gentry. Tom allows his eldest son to keep his hunters, his dogs, and groom, and that worthy may often be seen out coursing with Sir Stanley West, or riding with the officers of Slopeley Barracks.

Before the Burges' came to Grey Towers, Philip was a clerk in his father's office, and there was a prospect of his

being some day a respectable, energetic ship-broker. But now he has given up all thought of that kind, he enters fully into the luxury and ease of the life at Grey Towers, and he rides about, enjoying the sunshine of the present, and trying to make himself as good a sportsman as he can, notwithstanding the disadvantage of being in utter ignorance about horses in general, and of field sports in particular.

Not but what Philip means to settle some day and become a barrister, or a doctor, or a clergyman. He has not made up his mind which it shall be—ignoring, poor foolish fellow, that it takes half a life-time to study worthily for either of these professions.

Gertrude and Alice Burges might have developed into true friends had opportunity been given them—and Alice would have been all the better for the friendship. It is a misfortune for the girl that at this period of her history she is altogether situated among such worldly ambitious people who have not a thought beyond the gold and dross of earth. The visitors she meets at Grey Towers may perhaps be higher in the social scale than her relatives are, but they are not one whit nobler or larger-hearted, and they alternately flatter or snub the Burges' as it suits them best at the minute.

It would have been an infinite advantage had Alice enjoyed some of the kind motherly counsel Gertrude is so apt to give to those she loves, but as time goes on they rarely meet each other.

Mrs. Thwaites' children are sickly that winter, and another little one comes to take its place in this "troublesome world," a fretful, delicate child, that claims a great portion of its mother's attention, and makes her very anxious and weary.

Once or twice Mrs. Burges drives over to Easttown in her pony carriage, and each time she calls at the curate's house.

Alice is always with her, but a kind of restraint has come over her manner; she makes no attempt to continue the close confidence that at one time seems to open between herself and Gertrude.

The squire's wife talks eloquently to Mrs. Thwaites of her own affairs—the servants at Grey Towers, their doings and misdoings, and the worry they cause her, is a never-ending topic of conversation.

If Tom has his hobbies in his improvements and inventions, his wife certainly has *hers* in her servants. The cook, the footman, the still-room maid, the page, and Laura, the lady's maid, are all introduced to Gertrude's notice, and their manners and customs descanted upon.

Alice sits by, like the folded wood-sorrel flower, with a cold, hard look on her face, with firm, compressed lips, and a shadow that might be called sadness in her eyes, but she avoids meeting Gertrude's glance, so that the curate's wife cannot read their expression clearly.

She cannot tell whether it is sorrow or indifference that makes Alice so reticent, so utterly apathetic about all her mother is talking, but she feels sorry to see the change that has fallen on the girl, and that seems to be veiling her youth and brightness, and driving out her hope and joy.

Fain would she whisper words of comfort and consolation, but no opportunity ever offers during Mrs. Burges' short, fussy visits.

One day when they call in, Alice brightens a little, her face lights up with a flash of its old, frank expression, for Lotty has crept over to her side, and is pulling at her seal-skin jacket, asking to be taken up and nursed.

"Why do you wish to come to me, little girl?"

"Because you look so kind and nice, and I'm *so* tired."

"Come up on my knee, then, my pet! it will rest you, perhaps."

Alice lifts up the child tenderly, and presses her lips on its pale cheeks, holds her closely folded in her arms, and listens to her simple prattle, while her mother is proclaiming aloud to Gertrude of some terrible delinquency she has discovered in the housekeeper's accounts.

"*One needs to have a mint of money, they really do*

Mrs. Thwaites ; now *you* in your small household can't even have any idea of the immense outlay we have. Servants think they have only to waste, and ask, and have fresh supplies."

"I suppose so," answers Gertrude abstractedly—she is watching the pair at the window, and her eye rests on Lotty with anxiety.

For the child has grown very delicate of late—she has given up her play, and does not now amuse herself with books and toys, on the rug in the study, while her father reads and writes. She has left off being a "study-kitten," she says, and is never so happy as when her weary little head is pillowed on her mother's lap or on Leonard's shoulder.

"That child of yours is pining away, Mrs. Thwaites," says the squire's wife abruptly ; "I lost a little one myself just in that way, so I know the look well."

"Lotty seems ill, yet we can't find out what ails her."

"It's just a kind of decline, I should say. She needs all the best nourishment that can be got—give her the strongest beef-tea, and chicken broth, and all that sort of thing. If you lived nearer us, my cook should often make her up a nice dainty dish."

"I don't think Eastown lies at a very unapproachable distance from Grey Towers," retorts Alice, with a flush on her cheek, and a perceptible curl of bitterness on her lip.

Perhaps she is thinking of that basket of fruit, the only present she has ever volunteered to give the curate's wife, and which she was so harshly reproved about afterwards.

Tom and his wife are just the sort of people to lavish any amount of good things on the sumptuous entertainments they are so fond of giving—money is of no account when it ministers to their own importance or gratification—but true, unostentatious kindness and generosity are qualities utterly foreign to their natures—they are both of them far too selfish *to understand* what such qualities mean.

So Mrs. Burges appears not to hear her daughter's remark. She is folding her fur-trimmed velvet jacket closer over her chest, drawing up her rich silk dress, and disposing her sables, preparatory to stepping into the carriage.

Alice kisses little Lotty tenderly, hands her over to Gertrude with a look of deep pity, and then follows her mother.

The carriage outside has been the admiration of a dozen or so of dirty boys who have gathered as near it as the footman will permit. They stand at a respectful distance, and watch it and the graceful pair of ponies with a kind of awe.

Never have they seen such soft cushions! such glossy mats that look like piles of fleecy wool, such tiger-skin rugs with scarlet borders; and now their curiosity culminates to its highest point as the ladies appear and step into it—one of them so grand and stately, the other so handsome, and pale, and cold. The dirty boys look on them as beings of a superior order, rich and happy! objects even of envy!—at least the boys might envy them if they had time, but before the carriage is out of sight, they have returned to their game of leap frog, and ere the sound of the wheels has died away, merry shouting voices and bursts of laughter announce that the lads can be happy in their way also—happier perhaps than the occupants of the handsome new carriage.

Never had there been such a trying winter in Eastown as this proved. A bad kind of low fever broke out, that crept along the back streets, and up the dirty slums, bearing off here and there one and another to their resting-places.

Leonard does not spare himself through dread of the infection. He goes up the dark staircases, into close, fever-tainted rooms, and does what he can for the poor sufferers.

Mr. Gurling, the non-resident rector of Eastown, has left

a sum of money in Leonard's hands for distribution among the poor, but this proves sadly inadequate in the present emergency.

Gertrude is put to her very wits' ends in trying to make up bowls of soup, and in providing scraps and portions of nourishment for the needy sick, from the scanty fare of her own household.

It is ever a gleam of happiness to the wretched, fever-stricken patients when they see Leonard's well-known, sympathizing face, bending down over their beds. It is a joy untold, a comfort beyond expression to hear the sweet messages of salvation he brings for their comfort—words of Jesus, stronger even than death itself.

Many and many a poor creature as they catch the meaning of the "glad tidings" so prayerfully uttered, feel their very souls moved by the sound, their hopes grow brighter, and the joys of the eternal world seem to dawn like sun-rise on their senses, as life and its concerns fades from their view.

But his duties, so constant and so trying, tell visibly on the curate's health. His wife grows very sad as she sees how weak and spiritless he becomes.

For day after day brings its work. Strong men, smitten with disease, lay down their burdens, and creep helplessly to their beds. Worn-out mothers are taken from the cares of their busy homes, and little children escape from the hardness of poverty, and squallor, and want, to their quiet resting-places in the old churchyard.

Leonard may constantly be seen among the grass-covered graves now, his feet on the chill damp earth, his head uncovered, and his thin hair streaming in the wind, as he reads the words of the oft-repeated burial service, and commits young and old to the dust, in "hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ."



CHAPTER XII.

A FADED SNOWDROP.

SQUIRE BURGESS forsakes Eastown altogether at this crisis. He calls it a "pest place," and makes his servants take him miles round by the common, rather than drive through one of its streets, lest a breath of infected air might perchance penetrate the closed-up windows of his carriage.

He even leaves off going to his pew in Eastown church, and withdraws his family and household from attendance there. "The taint might possibly lurk in the atmosphere," he argues, "and neither he nor his people shall be subjected to danger."

So they all go Sunday after Sunday to Slopeley church, greatly to the delight of the young housemaids, for the soldiers from Slopeley barracks go there also.

Sir Stanley West generally manages to meet the Burges' family as they drive to church, and he rides along the whole five miles beside their carriage. It begins to be openly talked of in the whole country side now, that Alice is soon to be his second wife; rumour says they are already engaged.

At any rate Alice is often seen riding out with him, true, Philip or little Victor are generally of the party, but gossip adds, "What matter does that make? the fact seems clear enough."

Mrs. Wilson, the lawyer's wife, who is supposed to know all the news of the parish, comes one day and tells Gertrude it is a "settled thing."

"I'm sure I wish Miss Burges every happiness," says Gertrude, with a sigh she cannot repress.

"She has very little chance of happiness, my dear," retorts Mrs. Wilson, shaking her head in an ominous manner; "I could tell you tales of Sir Stanley's unkindness to his first wife, that would make you sorry for the poor young lady who is rushing on to a similar fate."

"I am very sorry indeed for her already," adds Gertrude candidly.

"I'm sure, Mrs. Thwaites, Sir Stanley must be greatly improved if he does at last turn out a good husband. He's frightfully in debt, all brought on by his own imprudence, people say, and then his temper is something neither you nor I could put up with, accustomed as we are to husbands that are quite the opposite of him." Mrs. Wilson warms with her subject, and exclaims, "Why, I'd rather give my daughter to the poorest curate in the diocese than to that bold, bad man, with all his rank and title! I hope though, Mrs. Thwaites, you don't think me personal in my allusions to 'poor curates;' I quite forgot for the moment how closely you are interested in them."

Gertrude laughs at the good lady's confusion.

"Don't apologize, Mrs. Wilson—though I'm sure no curate could well be poorer than Leonard is, I quite endorse your opinion. As a needy curate's wife, I am far happier than I could possibly be in any other position. I hope your daughter will be wise enough to prefer even a poor man, whose heart and life are right with God, than the richest baronet under the sun, if he cares for "none of these things."

"It seems a strange thing to me that the friends of Miss Burges urge on the match so much. They must take but short views, when they risk their child's happiness for mere rank. Squire Burges is frightfully ambitious, I know, and would do anything to get in with people of title. But there, if the Grey Towers' people are content, why should we trouble ourselves?"

But Gertrude cannot agree with this last remark. She *does* trouble herself, and thinks often and anxiously of poor Alice, and the lot that is evidently looming near at hand for her.

For it is true Sir Stanley has determined to win her for his wife, and he is not the man to relinquish any project on which he has set his mind. He admires her fair face and graceful figure, and notes that her voice is low, her manner natural and timid—utterly devoid indeed of that loudness and fastness the fashionable young ladies of Slopeley are so fond of affecting. He argues that if there is a spice of coolness and reserve in Alice's conduct towards him, why, all the more reason for him to show his power by overcoming it. Her reluctance only gives a keener zest to his wooing—teaches him he must conquer ere he can triumph.

Gertrude's thoughts and hands, however, have soon full occupation in her own household, for Lotty grows worse and worse. She is gradually drooping, like a bud that has been blighted in the early spring.

"An inward decline, and there is no remedy for it," the doctor has at length said.

But Gertrude and Leonard hope against hope. Night and day they are beside the little crib, tending, watching and praying. All their anxiety seems now to centre on the sick child, who looks up to them with sad, loving, expressive eyes, full of the deep mysterious language of coming death.

As it grows near the last, overworked Sarah keeps the other children away at the other end of the house, where their voices and noise cannot disturb the dying child.

In vain is the chicken-broth held to the parched lips—in vain the cool jelly, the rich beef-tea! Gertrude has managed to procure every single thing that has been recommended, no matter at what sacrifice to herself. The family meals will be scantier and more meagre for many a long day afterwards in consequence, but she hardly thinks of that.

All efforts fail! Lotty's summons "home" has come, and no human power can keep her longer here.

A dark, cold, bitterly frosty January morning is dawning into pale grey light, while Gertrude and Leonard still bend over the crib.

But the head with its clusters of golden curls is motionless on the pillow. The pallid face is growing cold, and the faint smile of death is gradually stealing over Lotty's lips.

“ And thus when the desolate morning
Shines through the wintry bars,
Lo ! God has taken the snowdrop,
To blossom beyond the stars.
It is hard to bow in submission,
When they think of the vacant place,
And see on the snowy pillow
The white, little placid face.”

The end came some time ago, yet father and mother still linger watching their child. Both see the awful change, but both are unwilling to believe it has really taken place. At last Gertrude rises, puts her arm tenderly on Leonard's shoulder, and says softly,—

“ We must not grieve. Oh ! we must not grieve, for we have a child in Heaven now, Leonard. Only think ! one of our dear ones is safe with Jesus.”

Gertrude is by far the bravest on this January morning. Her lighter, more impressible nature soonest asserts itself. As her grief has been the most violent while Lotty was suffering, and as each wave of pain that swept over the child seemed to be shared by the mother also, so now the reaction is more evident, when all is over.

Leonard cannot look up hopefully all at once. Bowed and hushed, his spirit can only utter voiceless supplications and laments beside his dead child.

He knows Lotty is free from all ills for evermore, and yet he has not strength to exclaim at once, “ The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.”



CHAPTER XIII.

CLOUDS STILL GATHER.

AFTER a time, Gertrude grows alarmed at the dreary apathy that still hangs over her husband. He seems altogether unlike himself—so strange and stunned!—so dead and spiritless!

She watches him with sorrow more intense than even the little pale face on the pillow calls forth. Lotty is at rest, but what change has come over Leonard? Taking him by the hand as she would have taken a child, she draws him slowly from that room of death into the study, where a fire has been burning all night. Hot coffee is steaming on the hob, and, pouring out a cup, she makes him drink it, and then seats herself on a low stool before him, holding his hand, and praying earnestly the gloom so darkly gathering over his mind may soon be dispersed.

She does not know then that he has caught the fever, and that it is slowly and certainly gathering over him with its resistless force. Gertrude thinks it is fatigue and anxiety crushing him down; she does not see that bodily illness is struggling with mental distress, and in the bitter strife reducing him to positive incapacity.

She watches him with tearful eyes, and her thoughts grow still more anxious as time speeds rapidly on.

“Oh! if he will only try to rouse himself a little. Anything would be better than that leaden dullness.” Then she draws nearer to him, and says softly,—

"Leonard, have you forgotten this is Sunday morning?"

"No, Gerty, but I'm resting. There is still half an hour to spare before church-time." He looks dreamily at the time-piece that is chiming the half-hour on the mantel shelf.

"Have you strength to go through the service, Leonard ; or shall I send for the churchwardens? Perhaps they can get some one else to take it to-day."

"No, there is no one that can do so—no clergyman but me in Eastown ; or, indeed, for miles round it. Besides, there's no time now. Don't fear for me, Gerty. My God has not forsaken me, though clouds hide Him from my sight now. He is near me still. Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

There is a strange, wild light in his eyes as he speaks—an expression altogether new to Gertrude, and that makes her shudder. It seems like a kind of exaltation rising within him, as though he is determined to triumph over the very weakness that is crushing him down.

When he begins to get ready for going out, Mrs. Thwaites slips out of the room silently, with a prayer at her heart for her husband. She dresses Lenny speedily, and tells him to go to church with his father.

"The boy's prattle will perhaps compose him a little," muses she. "Oh ! what a trial for my poor Leonard to have to appear before his people thus. God in His mercy help and support him !"

It is with a sinking heart she watches him walk slowly down the street, holding Lenny by the hand.

A keen north wind drives the sleet full in their faces ; it is a battle to keep up the umbrella and get on at all.

But Lenny trudges manfully along, with a brave heart, talking to his father all the way, and feeling all the responsibility of being selected to go to church when Harry and the rest are at home, in the shut-up house.

A dreary house it is to Gertrude this morning !

She sits alone shivering and crouching over the study fire.

Her clothes have not been off for three nights, and the wretched, forlorn sensation of unrest makes her bones ache as if with cold. Sarah vigorously keeps all the children away out of sight, telling them, with her clear quick-sightedness, that "Poor mamma is not well, and cannot bear their noise just now."

Gertrude feels grateful for this short respite, and would appreciate it still more, did not the thought haunt her that while she can "bury her sorrow" in solitude, Leonard must appear with the burden of his grief before the eyes of the whole congregation.

"I only pray he may not break down in the middle of the service," muses she, as she anxiously watches the hands of the time-piece move slowly on.

When she has made up her mind with a throb of relief that the service must now be half over, she starts up, for she hears steps in the hall, and Lenny's shrill voice says—

"Shall I take your wet umbrella, papa, and hang up your coat and hat?"

Gertrude is out in the hall in a moment, her face blanched with alarm.

"What is it, Lenny? Why are you back so soon?"

"Papa didn't preach any sermon; he only gave out the text, and we came away."

Leonard has gone to the study, and his wife finds him standing there with that wild light in his eyes growing brighter and brighter. It is a restless, flickering glow, that startles and alarms her beyond measure.

"Be calm, Leonard. Oh! my love, what ails you?"

"I'm not going *mad*; don't be afraid, Gerty, though my brain is throbbing and working beyond endurance. Do you know, when I got into the pulpit and was going to preach, Lotty's face, and her little head, all covered with golden curls, seemed to swim between me and the people, and I could not speak to them, words would not come; was it not strange?"

"Oh! my poor Leonard, you must be ill, very ill!" exclaims Gertrude in an agony.

She persuades him to lie down on the sofa, brings him a composing draught, then goes up to the nursery.

"Sarah, run to Dr. Evans, and ask him to come here at once. Your master is dreadfully ill, and I don't know what can be the matter with him, his manner is so wild and strange," is her rapid speech. "I'll stay with the children," adds she, "and, Lenny, I want you to be a good, wise little boy. Take your book down into the study, and read it there; but don't rustle the leaves, or disturb poor papa. If he wants me, ring the nursery bell. Can I trust you?"

"Oh! yes, mamma, I won't make the least noise."

Thus Gertrude prepares to meet the fresh sorrows that are rapidly gathering into her lot. This increasing illness of her husband's seems the greatest trial she ever had.

The fever that is smouldering in the curate's weakened frame soon bursts out in full intensity. For many days his life hangs in the balance.

"If the pulse rises any higher, hope must be at end," says Dr. Evans gravely; and the little household move about with hushed voices and trembling hearts, while the doubt lasts.

When little Lotty's coffin is carried out to the churchyard, the rector of Slopeley comes to read the service over her, for Leonard's fever is then at its height.

He is babbling away in wild delirium—calling for his "study kitten"—all unconscious she has just been laid to rest in her snow-covered grave.

Eastown wakes up just then to the conviction that their pastor has been much overworked of late.

His attendance on the sick in the wretched, fever-haunted districts has brought him down to death's door.

"If our good curate is taken away from us, I'll maintain he's little less than a martyr," says one churchwarden, who has hitherto been remarkable for his apathy. But now in

his first burst of awakened energy he sends off a telegram to Mr. Gurling at Cannes.

Formerly the rector's ailments may have been very much on his nerves, or, perhaps, even on his imagination. But now positive disease has set in, and he really is unable to take the journey to Eastown, much less to assist in the work of the parish. Distressed at the curate's break-down—he, who was always so strong, so helpful, so energetic and uncomplaining—the rector does his best to aid in the matter. As he cannot come himself, he has his nephew, Richard Gurling, appointed second curate to Eastown church, who is to help Leonard in clerical duties, and live in the deserted rectory.

Leonard's pulse does not reach the point of danger, so his life does not pass away with its throbs. Gradually the fever cools down, his brow grows moist, his eyes calm, and Dr. Evans shakes hands heartily with Mrs. Thwaites, and congratulates her the danger is over.

A good constitution, tender nursing, and, more than all, the mercy of an ever-ruling Providence, has brought him through the attack; and he rises up, weak as a child, to take his place in life again.

Very pale, very thin he looks, when he first goes out of doors, leaning on Gertrude's arm, for a turn or two by the reservoir; very slow are his footsteps, very feeble his pace as he creeps along in the spring sunshine.

But ere long all this will disappear, for hope has come back in full, rich draughts, and the spirit of sweet peace has taken up its abode in his heart again.

This lingering walk by the placid water is looked on by him as the best he has ever taken there. The limited view seems to expand and grow bright, and the sky overhead seems clearer and calmer than he ever noticed it before.

"It's worth while being ill, Gerty, to enjoy the coming to health again. Every breath of air seems an invigorating

draught, I could bask, and live, and rejoice in the sunshine."

Gertrude looks up to him, with her eyes full of emotion. "Leonard, you have been given back to me from the very grasp of death. Oh! my darling, my darling! thank God I have you still!"

The curate leans more heavily on her arm, and pauses as he replies,—

"God has been very good to us both, Gerty! He has willed that we shall journey longer together during our earthly pilgrimage. Oh! may the future find us more useful, more unselfish, more completely dedicated to His service."

Richard Gurling, the new curate, is a young man—very young. He has only just been ordained, and Eastown is nearly his first curacy. He is fond of his profession, and has entered the church, not for the sake of the "loaves and fishes," but because his heart is in the work, and he considers there is no higher privilege on earth than that of striving to win souls to Jesus.

So, after all, the clouds that once seemed to hang so heavily over Eastown have passed away, and out of Leonard's illness has sprung a positive good, for he has now a helper in the parish, a man after his own mind, and one, now his shyness is wearing off, who can be both companionable and useful.





CHAPTER XIV.

A BETROTHAL GIFT.

IN that very spring day on which Leonard Thwaites is creeping forth after his illness to take his first walk in the spring sunshine, Alice Burges is pacing to and fro in the lower garden at Grey Towers, holding disturbed counsel with herself.

Events have come to a crisis, and that evening she is to give her final answer to Sir Stanley West. She has held out even till now. The recollection of Ralph Burges is so vivid, her happiness in his affection has been so great, that she hopes against hope.

Surely all that freshness of feeling, that dream of love and joy, has not been in vain! While she remains faithful to her betrothed lover, there still seems a link between them; but now she is called on to say the words that must separate them for ever, and she shrinks from uttering them.

Her own people call her mean and silly in cherishing an affection no longer returned. They argue, if Ralph cared for her he would have come or sent ere this. But a silence like that of the grave has fallen between them, and sometimes Alice is convinced he really must be dead.

So she doubts and fears—hopes and distrusts—yet comes not one whit nearer a certainty than before. Well would it be for Alice if she had learned to look up through the dim shadows to Him who gives light to the seeking, rest to the

weary ; but she has not yet begun to look for guidance where alone it can be found ; and her mind, all undisciplined as it is, can gain no victory, win no peace.

Even the glad spring-time comes to the earth with no brightness for her ; she thinks the beautiful tints and perfumes have vanished from the flowers this season, and that the soft glow has gone out of the sky.

Then all at once she grows a coward, and feels she can bear this terrible strain no longer. All the energies of her people are roused in this poor strife that is going on ; words and hints, reproofs and slights are all hurled against her, and her will is growing feeble, and disturbed, and dim. Like the vanquished soldier on the battle-field, she must throw down her arms, and let them lead her as they please.

Her father would have forced her into the marriage long before, but the intended bridegroom has come to the rescue, and has been the one to counsel delay. For Alice has appealed to him, and told him all about Ralph, and Sir Stanley has promised to wait till she herself can give him hope.

He has even been courteous and kind ; very *kind*, when compared with what others have said and done, and she no longer feels the intense dislike she once cherished in her heart towards him.

So warily, so cleverly has Sir Stanley won his way, that she has even begun to believe in him.

“Not that he can ever be like Ralph !”

And here she breaks down, and a rush of tearful regret comes to her eyes as she recalls all that Ralph has been to her in those happy days, now far away in the past.

While Alice is battling thus with herself on this bright spring morning, with quick tears falling from her eyes, she hears her father and Philip talking together as they come towards the “wilderness” where she has found a retreat. Not for worlds would she let them see her tear-stained face !

Latterly Alice has put on a proud, cold manner, that she

weakly supposes will serve her as a kind of defence, and repel interference; so she has no wish to exhibit her emotion now it has come to the last.

This would-be proud bearing of Alice's has amused the squire. He has joked about it in private to his wife, and has termed it, "Alice riding her high horse."

Tom has adopted a new kind of phraseology of late. As the sailor is supposed to bring nautical terms into his discourse to heighten the effect, and define the meaning, so the squire adopts pithy expressions, borrowed from his pet hobby, that he supposes make him rather witty and facetious.

When he laughs at this poor, little assumed dignity Alice has put on—assumed when her heart is sinking with shyness, hopelessness, and despair—he exclaims jocosely,—

"Give her the rein, Hannah. Let her canter, and prance, and prank about for a while; she'll come in tamely enough when the curb is put on."

He elects to ignore his daughter has any deep feeling at all in the matter, or that she can possibly cherish any affection for Ralph still.

"Girls never know what is good for them. It's sheer obstinacy of Alice pretending she cares about Ralph Burges now. Why, he's little better than a pauper! and here are rank and a title dangling within her grasp. Hannah, you should use a little authority with her, and insist on her marrying West."

"I think *insisting* would not be good policy, Tom. Whenever I hint about her wonderful good fortune in having an offer from a man in Sir Stanley's position, she only grows more tiresome and more low-spirited than ever. I think it much the best plan to let her alone."

"Perhaps so. I can't think where the girl gets her obstinate disposition from. It must be due to you, Hannah, for there's not a spice of contumacy in me."

"Upon my word, you're growing very complimentary,

Tom ; you like to have your own way, I'm sure, and that is all Alice wants in this case," retorts Mrs. Burges, in an injured tone ; and the discussion drops for this time.

To return to Alice in the lower garden. When she hears her father's voice, she hurries out of the wilderness and past the tangle, by another pathway. She runs through the shrubbery, drying her tears as she goes, and does not pause till she reaches her own room, and there she remains undisturbed till the first dinner-bell rings.

Laura, as usual, comes up to get out her young lady's things, and help her to dress. Alice has grown accustomed to be waited on now, though at first it was a trial to her to have other hands doing for her what she could so well manage for herself. The quick-sighted waiting-woman soon detects the tearful eyes, and forms her own opinion about the matter.

She knows as well as her mistress does that Sir Stanley is coming there that evening for his final answer, and she quietly draws her conclusions from the emotion she perceives.

"She don't want to marry that dark, heavy-browed man, baronet and all as he is. I don't wonder at it, for my part, for I can't abear him myself."

Laura has more than once uttered that remark in the servants' hall, before the listening audience, who believe every word she tells them—for they say—

"Who should know better than the young lady's own maid?"

There is much sympathy for Alice in that servants' hall. She has won many hearts there by her gentleness, and now they know her little history, they side with her as with the helpless or weaker side, and they talk over the "affair" in a way that shows they are far from ignorant of family incidents in general.

"What dress will you please to wear this evening, miss?" asks Laura, in a feeling tone of voice.

"*My white Llama* will do very well," answers Alice, not

caring in the least what dress she dons for this particular occasion.

"But, miss, won't that dull white material look very unbecoming, now you have such a dreadful bad cold?"

"I don't mind the unbecomingness, the Llama will do."

"Then, miss, let me advise you to wear some pomegranate colour in your hair, and a sash, and trimmings of the same shade."

"I prefer some black velvet in my hair, Laura."

"What ornaments shall I take out, please, miss?"

"Not any—the black velvet will answer all purposes."

Mrs. Burges steps lightly into the room at the minute, and hears her daughter's reply. Truth to say, she has even paused a moment at the door before entering, and has thus caught the spirit of Alice's controversy with the maid, so her visit is opportunely timed.

She comes forward smiling.

"I am just in time, you see. As you decline wearing your old ornaments, Alice, I have brought you a set of new ones, that you will hardly refuse, I think."

She opens a leather case, lined with crimson, in which a brilliant set of aqua-marine ornaments, set in delicate gold, are reposing.

"Oh, ma'am! Ain't they superb?" exclaims Laura, holding up her hands in admiration.

"Yes, I don't think I ever saw a lovelier set. The design is so chaste and elegant, and they are so graceful and pretty," replies Mrs. Burges, with a vivacity most especially intended for the waiting-maid's notice.

Poor woman! She will fain have everything bright and pleasant around her if she can. Like most selfish people in the world, she is vexed when things are turning out not quite as she wishes. This reluctance or obstinacy of her daughter in not appreciating the good fortune that is offered is a very sore point with her now, but she chooses to ignore it as much as possible before witnesses.

Mrs. Burges flashes the ornaments before the light.

"How charmingly they will become Miss Burges, to be sure!" exclaims Laura, as she gives a quick glance of scrutiny at the drooping eyelids of her young mistress.

"Where did they come from, mamma?" asks Alice quietly.

"Perhaps I had better not satisfy your curiosity just now, my love. You will find out all about it by-and-by. Let me help you to put them on."

She clasps the glittering necklet, with its pendulous drops of sea-tinted brilliants, round her daughter's neck; she fastens the handsome brooch in her dress, while Alice stands passively before her, expressing neither dissent nor acquiescence.

If the thought comes into her mind that these ornaments are Sir Stanley West's betrothal gifts, she seems too weary to grasp the full import of wearing them; even the power of resistance seems at last to fail her.

When the dressing is complete, Mrs. Burges, with an unwonted show of maternal demonstrativeness, draws Alice's hand within her arm, and thus they go down the broad staircase and into the library.

The view, disclosed when Mrs. Burges opens the door is Sir Stanley standing on the hearth-rug before the fire, his elbow leaning on the mantel-piece. He listens, or seems to listen, to the squire, who is giving one of his rambling, fussy speeches about something or other.

Both turn round as the ladies enter the room. It is all like a dream, a dissolving view to Alice. Her father and mother seem to pass away from her gaze, and presently she finds herself alone with Sir Stanley, who is stooping down looking at her aqua-marine set, and thanking her for wearing his present—his betrothal gift.

"They suit you admirably, Miss Burges; and by-and-by, when you are my wife, I will add some diamonds—heirlooms—to your store. For you *will* be my wife, won't you, Alice?"

The baronet seems to take Alice's consent for granted.

He talks on eagerly for a while, and then she finds he is pressing her to name the "day"—an "early day."

If Sir Stanley expects any enthusiasm from his intended bride, he must be sadly disappointed, so spiritless, so lifeless are her replies.

She cannot get rid of the feeling of unreality that comes over her. It is as though some other person is speaking and acting—not herself.

Have we not all experienced that kind of sensation some time or other during any great crisis of our lives?

When Sir Stanley names the expediency of an early marriage, Alice is almost submissive. She never even tries to dispute his wish. Whether it is the passiveness of indifference or despair, he cannot quite make out, so he leaves the question to solve itself as best it may hereafter. He has no desire to probe too deeply into hidden motives, now he has won the prize he seeks.

Dinner has been put off half-an-hour, that in the interval the pair may have time to settle this momentous question of their lives, and then Mrs. Burges taps at the library door, and comes in to offer her congratulations.

"I am *so* glad it is all so happily settled, my love!" she exclaims in eager excitement, as she sees Sir Stanley is still holding her daughter's hand.

The baronet stoops his tall figure, and presses a rapid kiss on his expectant mother-in-law's lips.

He is quite prepared to go through all recognized forms with due propriety. He shakes the squire's hand respectfully—Philip's, with a gratified laugh.

Had the two boys been downstairs from the nursery, doubtless he would have clasped them to his heart with effusion.

"I knew it would all come right at last!" exclaims Tom, hardly able to subdue his glance of triumph at things shaping themselves according to his wish at last.

He has been sorely vexed with his daughter for hanging

back so long, but he is now ready to take up the "rôle" of an affectionate father again.

"All come right! Has it done so?" Alice asks herself once and again, as she sits silently at the dinner-table. She seeks wearily for an answer, but none comes.





CHAPTER XV.

MY SISTER ANN.

THEY dine alone ; that is, Sir Stanley West is the only guest present, and he, as Tom says, "Is quite one of the family now."

Proud, indeed, is the squire as he glances down the table, and makes this remark with a laugh.

His ambition for a high connexion for his daughter is on the point of being realized, and who can tell to what heights of rank and grandeur the Burges family may yet soar ?

Visitors are expected in the evening. It is not according to the custom at Grey Towers to let an occasion of such importance pass by without due celebration.

So several county families, and some of the officers from Stopeley barracks, are invited, that their congratulations may mingle with the household joy.

Mrs. Burges sends for the officers on all festive occasions. She says "They are such pleasant, gentlemanly fellows, always ready to come and swell out a party, and they make a room look *so* nice with their regimentals."

It is very impressive on that evening to note the outspoken importance of the squire as he talks of his intended son-in-law ; nor is it less striking to watch the fussy importance of Mrs. Burges as she whispers to every lady in the room, in "strict confidence, you know," that the wedding is to take place very soon.

"Dear Stanley is most anxious to take home his bride,

and a great place like Stourton Hall sadly wants a mistress to rule it," adds she.

Major Leslie's wife—a pale, faded-out, anxious-looking woman, who has five marriageable daughters to dispose of, all tall, voluble, fashionable, dressy girls, whose garments require hundreds and hundreds of yards of material during the year—Mrs. Leslie listens to Mrs. Burges' whispers, with something like envy tugging away at her heart.

Here is Alice Burges, an only daughter, making a grand match, for such as the major's wife are wont to look on baronets as "great catches ;" while her own five daughters, far handsomer and far more showy girls, have never one of them had an offer yet.

"Dear Stanley" would doubtless prefer seeing a little more animation in his "ladye-love," when so many curious eyes are critically watching her every look and action ; but Alice is above putting on a false manner, and has no thought of pretending to a vivacity she does not feel. The merest monosyllables are her sole replies to his eloquent speeches.

Her face is paler than usual, her eyes have a timid, startled expression, such as one notes in a hunted deer, and she looks up and down the large rooms, feeling as if all these people are against her.

Not one of them has the slightest sympathy with that far-away life of hers, that has once been so full of hope, and truth, and happiness ; not one of them knows or cares what a terrible pain she has at her heart now, nor how she feels as if she is acting a part, and is writhing under a bitter torment of self-accusation.

Ralph, beloved and good as he is, has drifted away from her for ever now ; she has raised a barrier with her own hands that must separate them for ever, and all through that long evening she feels as if she hates and despises herself for the act.

Yet Sir Stanley is doing his best to make himself agreeable. *Under cover of a crashing duet, two of the Miss Leslies*

are performing at the piano ; he is bending down, talking softly to her, and turning over some sketches of Westminster Abbey that lie on a table before them.

"Have you ever been in the Abbey, Alice?"

"Oh, yes ; very often indeed," she replies, and her thoughts wander off to the times when she wandered there with Ralph.

"Ever been there?" Why, she knew every clustered pillar, every lancet-shaped arch, every beautiful harmony in nave and transept, and every monument and tomb.

Often and often had she and Ralph listened there together to the grand anthems, till their very hearts had caught the tone of the inspired theme ; and as she thinks of all this, she forgets Sir Stanley is still speaking to her—yet this is what he is saying,—

"You shall go to Westminster Abbey again with me, for you have no objection to going to London for our wedding trip, have you?"

"I like London very much," is her quiet reply.

"You shall see it under new circumstances soon. I'm glad you are a sensible girl, and don't object to town. Some newly-married people think it proper to rush away to foreign places, where they get bored and cheated ; others bury themselves in some frightful solitude, and grow tired of each other before the honeymoon is over."

Sir Stanley laughs at his own wit, while Alice bends over the sketches, and does not reply.

"I will introduce you to my sister Ann ; she is Lady Ann Holding, and lives near Eaton Square."

"You are very kind," replies Alice, looking up. She has never heard of his sister before.

"You and Ann must be good friends ; she was for ever boring me to get married again, and now she will be gratified."

"Lady Ann will be very much disappointed in me, I fear," falters the bride-elect.

"Not at all ; nothing of the sort, Alice ; how can she be disappointed in one like you ? and, besides, she will like any one I choose. She will drive you about in her carriage, and introduce you to her friends. Her two daughters are charming women, most fashionable and clever ; you will be sure to like them."

But the prospect does not reassure Alice, nor does it rouse her to greater animation. She turns over the lithographs listlessly, hardly knowing that she does so, and never even noting what they are.

If Sir Stanley misses the answering looks and sweet sympathy of his betrothed, he does not let it be visible. Perhaps he is thinking Alice shall by and by atone for her continued indifference, and for the apathy of her manner now.

And Alice feels herself getting more and more entangled in the meshes of the net cast over her ; henceforth she must accept all, bear all in silence.

As she presses her face on the pillows that night, her heart yearns for a friend who would counsel and advise her. Gertrude Thwaites is just the one she needs, but, alas ! that intimacy has nearly died out. They very seldom meet now, and are never alone together.

"Gertrude will no doubt utterly despise me, when she hears I have promised to marry another, while I am still in such doubt, and so sorry about Ralph Burges," thinks Alice, with a great sob.

But in this she wrongs the curate's wife.

Gertrude would not despise the poor girl ; *poor*, though she seems surrounded with much of this world's good ; *lonely*, though crowds of acquaintances flock to the house with their outspoken congratulations.

Gertrude, with her true womanly sympathy, would pity her, and lovingly point her to Him, the Friend and Brother, who will give sweet peace to all who come to Him in faith, and who cast the burden of their sins and sorrows at His feet.



CHAPTER XVI.

RALPH'S RETURN.

WHILE preparations for Alice Burges' wedding are at their height at Grey Towers—while the lady of the house is working herself into a state of chronic fever lest anything should fail in being quite “au fait”—and while the squire is comporting himself more pompously and overbearingly than ever, on the strength of the coming alliance—circumstances are happening in London that threaten to interfere with the plans, perhaps upset them altogether.

We must relate what they are, and, with a privileged eye, take a glance into a certain office near Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Two men are there in deep conversation; one of them is holding some papers in his hand, the other is watching him as he carefully examines them.

“This will be perfectly legal, Mr. Burges. I suppose you will put in your claim at once?”

“I will certainly lose no time in going to Grey Towers,” replies Ralph Burges, for it is no other than he, who has just returned from Australia on some very important business.

The lawyer, Mr. Atkin, a keen, clever, restless little man, all vivacity and animation, lays the papers on the table with a smile, and then exclaims warmly,—

“Upon my word, I'm glad of it! Tom Burges well

deserves to have his deserts—the unmitigated, heartless scoundrel! And to think of his keeping poor old Mrs. Burges in such mortal terror!—she must have been positively almost frightened out of her senses by him.”

“It was certainly a case of undue influence,” replies Ralph calmly. He cannot see the thing quite as Mr. Atkin does, so he will not endorse the lawyer’s philippics.

“Undue influence, my dear fellow! It was moral force; as bad an instance as I’ve ever heard of. I’m delighted to find Tom is tricked after all; foiled with his own weapons! Aunt Hetty was a clever woman, but how in the world did she manage to keep Tom in ignorance of this?”

“It is all explained in her letter to me. As soon as this will was made, signed, and sealed, she sent it off to Mr. Curtis, my employer in Australia, and as it is of later date than the one Tom caused her to make, of course it is the true one.”

“Of course, of course. Why didn’t you return home at once?”

“I only saw poor Aunt Hetty’s death mentioned in an English newspaper some months after it happened, and I had to wind up affairs before I could leave. I could not desert Mr. Curtis till he had some one to take my place.”

“Well, we have you here now, at any rate. What a surprise this will is sure to cause! It will be like a bomb-shell exploding in the very midst of them all. Oh, I should like to see Tom’s face when he first hears about it? Do you know, I admire these grand instances of retribution, they convey a deep lesson and a very practical one.” Mr. Atkin smiles, and rubs his hands vigorously together as though he enjoys it very much.

But Ralph does not smile in return; he merely says in an earnest tone,—

“All this must be in strict confidence between us, Mr. Atkin. My intentions and plans are very vague and shadowy yet. I know not what I may do, or how I may act.”

"You'll establish your right at once, I hope ; one thing is quite certain, Mr. Burges, you can never set aside this will, for other interests than yours are mixed up with it. Let me state the case clearly as it stands. Mrs. Hetty Burges has left you her whole property ; failing heirs on your part, it goes at your death to Mr. Leonard Thwaites."

"You forget Philip Burges."

"I'm coming to that now. Three hundred a year then reverts to Philip. How poor Mrs. Hetty must have disliked his father, for his name never appears at all."

Ralph listens to the lawyer with a thoughtful look on his brow, and as he makes no reply, the little man runs on volubly,—

"Your course is plain enough, Mr. Burges. Shall I go down with you to Eastown, and put your claims in force at once?"

"No, thank you. I must visit Grey Towers alone."

"As you please ; and remember any trust you repose in me shall be carefully guarded—'safe and secret' is my motto in business."

"I'm sure I can trust you fully. And now I will set off and prepare for my journey. You shall hear again from me before very long."

Thus they part, and the next morning Ralph Burges is at the King's Cross Station, ready to start for Grey Towers by the noon-day train.

He walks about on the platform, and hardly glances at the passengers who are just emerging from a newly-arrived train. Perhaps his thoughts are pre-occupied, perhaps he takes but little interest in people who he supposes must be strangers to one who has been so long absent from England.

Had he looked more carefully, however, he would have recognized Tom Burges, who, with his intended son-in-law, steps out of a first-class carriage, and walks in the direction of a cab-stand.

They have come to London on business connected with the coming marriage, and they walk on, talking loudly and

carelessly, little thinking so unlooked-for a visitor is just on the point of starting for Grey Towers.

Standing on the platform, in the bright noon-day sunlight, Ralph Burges' figure is clearly defined.

One sees he is only a little above middle height. His shoulders are slightly stooped; grave lines are already visible on his brow; Ralph's life has not been all sunshine, far from it! Many cares, many disappointments, and much loneliness have already left traces on face and heart. He is no longer the high-spirited youth, full of tricks and merriment, Leonard once knew in the days gone by.

As he stands in the light, talking to a railway-guard, the lookers-on might perceive his hair and beard are light brown; his features handsome and refined; his eyes thoughtful, and of a soft, kindly blue; his mouth clear-cut, and expressive; his smile sweet and tender as a lady's.

Not by any means the man to make a stir in the world, nor to win hearts to himself in a gush of evanescent popularity; he would not care one jot for that—not the one to make himself conspicuous, to boast, and brag, and triumph; such display is totally foreign to his nature.

But Ralph is one who can do great and brave actions in secret, when self-sacrifice and patient endurance can accomplish them; and he is one who detests everything mean, and petty and unprincipled. Nor is he ashamed to do right, or what seems to him right, from the highest and purest motives.

The great solitudes in which he has lived in the far-off country have taught him many lessons; he has had time to *think*, which is not always easy to people who live in the great, busy work-a-day world at home.

Ralph has lowly views of himself, but great and lofty ones of the Master he serves; and he strives, however humbly, to follow the teaching of the Divine Exemplar.

Such is Ralph Burges, and the pen lingers lovingly while *sketching out* the character of so true and unselfish a man.

When he left England last, the Burges family were settled at Kingston ; he was a favoured guest at their house, and all the family smiled on his engagement with Alice. She was inexpressibly dear to him ; what was there in the whole world he would not have done for Alice ?

For months and months past he is perplexed to find all his letters to her are unanswered. Every post has carried its due modicum of lover's talk from him. He has written with confidence of his hopes and fears, his prospects of pleasant days in the future, and all the hopeful dreams that usually spring up between those who look forward to spending their days together. But there has been nothing but dumb silence in reply.

Then Ralph has grown uneasy, and has written many epistles to her father, inquiring the cause of Alice's silence, but no better result has come ; there is not even a word or a line in answer.

It is only when he arrives in England, the news reaches him of the wonderful change that has come over the Burges family. No one can be more startled and surprised than he is to find they are already settled down at Grey Towers, "reigning and ruling" there, rejoicing in the possession—secured to them as they believe—by Aunt Hetty's last will.

The secret about the missing letters is easily explained ; but alas ! the explanation will only cast a deeper shadow over the character of Squire Burges.

He holds uncontrolled and absolute sway over the letter-bag. Woe betide any one whose meddling fingers dare pry into its contents till he has broken the seal, and examined them, and doled out the letters to their respective owners.

A single glimpse of Ralph Burges' somewhat scrawling penmanship is enough to condemn that particular epistle, first, to Tom's pocket for rapid scrutiny ; then to the keeping of the secret-hiding flames. The squire has not grown more scrupulous as he has grown older ; on the contrary,

the wider sphere only seems to bring more occasion for actions that will not bear the light.

While in Mr. Atkin's office, Ralph has not told the lawyer his exact plans with regard to his visit to Grey Towers, simply because they are all too vague and visionary to be sketched out in words; but now, as he sits leaning back in the railway-carriage, these plans shape themselves so pleasantly in his mind, that he goes on thinking and dreaming of them.

Long and joyously his reverie lasts. The future seems to spread out before him, tinged with roseate hues and bright tints. His pulse quickens, his heart beats fast and loud as the prospect—delusive as a will-o'-the-wisp's flashes—seems to open up glimpses of what "might be."

Alice will be his wife, and then this last will of Aunt Hetty's will, after all, make but little difference in the "ménage" of Grey Towers. Neither he nor Alice are one bit grasping, and alike as they are in thoughts about money, they will require but a very moderate portion of the property.

Tom shall still reign at Grey Towers, manage the estate, hedge it about with alterations and improvements, and the world will never know he is a deposed ruler, holding possession by the sufferance of another.

Alice and Ralph will be happy in each other. Oh! so happy! And who knows but by-and-by little clustering heads and pattering feet will cheer up the rooms of Grey Towers, and make the old place musical with childish laughter and song?

Then the estate will be in no danger of ever going out of the family. It will be firmly fixed and settled in it then.

Such was Ralph's day-dream—wonderfully vivid to him, as he speeds on through well-remembered scenes to the loved home of his youth; but in reality, as unsubstantial and vain as the "mirage" that bewilders the weary traveller.

He rouses himself at the terminus of the Branch line, and *collects the rest of his journey can be done on foot.*

The porter comes up and suggests a cab, but Ralph has no desire to be whirled along the dusty roads on that May evening.

He knows the short cuts and roundabout ways through the fields too well for that; so, shouldering his light valise, he springs over the stile, and sets out for a ramble through lanes, and copse, and meadow.

On he goes with that dream of his still pealing like a chime of joy-bells through his brain. He will soon see Alice now—and then—and then?

Oh! how speedily he will explain all, and make matters clear and pleasant to this family, who are dear to him because Alice is one of them.

He breathes in the soft spring air, and tramples down the grass-bedded violets and spangling daisies under foot, thinking, truly enough, there is, after all, no place in the world that can be compared to England.

Where else is there such perfume-laden air? Where such breezes odorous with the scents of primroses and hyacinths?

Ralph's step is light and quick, for the "mirage" in his heart grows brighter and brighter as he goes on. All will end happily now, like a cheerily-told tale.

He goes through the lodge gates of Grey Towers. Ah! truly his dream is becoming a reality already, for he sees even now a glimpse of white drapery gleaming through the trees. Some one has just vanished round the corner of that grand, new conservatory, and the figure in the distance looks just like Alice.

Ralph, with his valise still on his shoulder, darts after the vision with a rapid step, but there is no one to be seen.

Perhaps she is gone into the conservatory. Ralph opens the door softly, with fingers that tremble in their eagerness.

Alice *is* there. She is cutting some sprays of flowers and laying them, one by one, in a little basket, touching the frail blossoms lovingly, as though she fears to mar their beauty by careless handling.

Ralph gazes at her a few moments as she works on, all unconscious of his presence. The slanting rays of the setting sun fell on her bare head, making the hair look almost golden in the soft light, as she stands there surrounded by sweet-scented, full-tinted flowers and shrubs.

One glance shows Ralph all this. His eyes have been yearning for a sight of his betrothed for long days and months, and now he seems to take in all in one long, absorbed gaze. Then he goes towards her.





Ralph gazes at Alice in the conservatory.—Page 102.



CHAPTER XVII.

"SO NEAR, AND YET SO FAR."

ALICE hears the step, but does not look up; she thinks it is White, the gardener, come in to close the sashes before sunset.

"Alice, my darling!"

A wild cry of surprise and joy is the answer. Down fall the flowers so tenderly handled a while ago, and for a moment Alice is held closely to Ralph's heart.

Only for a moment though; she quickly recovers from her confused astonishment, recollection returns, and her joy fades out, as she quickly draws herself from his encircling arms.

"Oh, Ralph, where have you been so long?"

"I only returned to England yesterday; so you see I lost no time before I came to see you."

"But where have you been hiding all these months? I thought you were dead, or had forgotten me. Why didn't you answer my letters, Ralph?"

"Oh! I would fain ask you the same question, my darling. I *have* written and written, times without number, and have looked in vain for a reply from you."

"How strange that is! Did you direct your letters here?"

"No, Alice; I thought you were still at Kingston; there must be a whole packet of letters lying there for you."

Ralph would fain dismiss *that* subject at once; what



cares he for missing letters now he has Alice herself beside him? One moment of her presence is better than all the epistles she could write.

He even grows impatient at her pertinacity in still questioning him.

"I cannot make it out, Ralph; how could the letters *all* have gone astray? There must be some strange mystery about them. If only *one* had reached me, I should have been, oh, so brave and comforted, so much might have been saved, and I should never have been so bewildered and unhappy. I thought you had given me up, and had no longer any place for me in your memory."

"No place for you in my memory!" echoes Ralph, as he once more impetuously tries to draw Alice towards him.

What further explanations, or confidences, or confessions might have taken place between them will be for ever a mystery, for, at the moment, another step is heard entering the conservatory, and the imposing figure of Mrs. Burges is seen at the opened door.

She has on a garden hat, trimmed with bright green ribbons, a dress of the same hue with cerise bows and fringes; the very blossoms look pale and subdued beside her gaudy show of colours.

Alice has been a long time gathering the flowers, so she has come out to help her finish the task before it grows dark. She wants to fill one or two more dainty vases in honour of guests who are expected at Grey Towers to dinner that evening.

Mrs. Burges can hardly believe her eyes; she sees Alice beside a man in a travelling dress, with a valise on his shoulders. Surely he is holding her hand, and looking down into her eyes as though he would fain read their every glance and meaning.

Mrs. Burges bustles up towards the pair, much wrath in her heart, and much indignation rising to her tongue, when *Ralph turns round* and discovers the irate lady.

"Here comes your mamma, Alice," and in an instant his hand is held out frankly, with a warm impulse of greeting.

Ralph is not startled, nor surprised, nor alarmed at her presence ; he feels he has a right to be there, and to be warmly welcomed too.

But no kind welcome, no answering smile responds to his.

A look very like excessive anger flashes from Mrs. Burges' eyes as she recognizes the guest. She advances towards him in a dignified manner.

"Pardon me, Mr. Ralph Burges ; I didn't know you at first."

"So I thought," replies he smiling. His heart is so warm towards Alice that he cannot even perceive the cold dignity of her mother, and he goes on cheerily,—

"My visit down here must seem rather unexpected, but I had no time to send word I was coming ; I only arrived in England yesterday."

"Pray do you make a long stay in this country ?" asks the lady, as she quickly withdraws her fingers from Ralph's clasp.

"I think so ; I hope so ; indeed, I have no present intention of ever going abroad again," replies he, and his eyes search round for an answering look from Alice.

But she is stooping down, busily gathering up the flowers that have been scattered and bruised beneath their tread.

She lays them all, crushed as they are, in her basket, and bends low, perhaps to hide that her face is flushed, her hands trembling.

"My husband is not at home, and I'm very sorry for it," continues Mrs. Burges, with much candour, for she is indeed much puzzled what to do.

"I hope he is quite well," says Ralph, as he still watches Alice picking up broken leaves and stray buds.

"Quite well, thank you ; he went up to London this morning, and does not return till to-morrow."

"Oh ! I shall see him then," and Ralph can resist no

longer. He turns to help the young lady, who clearly has some difficulty in her task, as she is still turning away from him and looking about on the ground.

"What have you lost, Alice?"

"Only my scissors ; they fell here, I think."

Ralph makes a dive under the shelves, and brings out the missing articles in triumph.

"Here they are, Alice ; they were hidden behind that tub of syringa."

Mrs. Burges has had time to recover herself and has rapidly decided what to do. Clearly she cannot drive Ralph out of the doors of Grey Towers ; he, who was once made so welcome amongst them, and was once received as the betrothed of her daughter. Neither can she ask him to stay there, situated as they are now, with a wedding close at hand, and preparations in full progress ; his presence would be an interruption and a vexation, to say the least.

She must try and compromise matters a little ; so in a very dignified manner, she says gravely,—

"We are expecting some friends to dinner this evening, Mr. Burges ; perhaps you will stay and join our party?"

Ralph looks at her a little surprised.

"Thank you ; I shall have much pleasure in remaining here."

"And as it may be rather late before we separate, perhaps you will stay at Grey Towers to-night ? Tom will be here quite early in the morning."

"Oh, yes ; I will stay. I have no thought of running away at once," returns Ralph, with the look of surprise still on his face. He begins to think the mistress of the house is just a little strange in her manner towards him.

Then Mrs. Burges leads the way out of the conservatory, taking care to send on her daughter a little in advance, while she lingers to point out to her visitor some of the changes now so visible all over the place.

 She is even voluble now, thrusting in remarks, and

making conversation, so that Ralph finds he must follow her lead, and answer her questions, and listen to her suggestions. The veriest stranger who ever called at Grey Towers might have taken part in the subject, so little did Mrs. Burges seem to recollect or recognize the former intimacy there had once existed between herself and Ralph.





CHAPTER XVIII.

THE OLD HOME.

BEFORE many minutes have passed, Ralph finds himself alone in the room that had once been Aunt Hetty's. The "guest chamber" now.

Every vestige of its interior has been changed, yet Ralph recognizes it at once, and glances round it with a sigh, as he thinks of the many kindnesses he has received at the hands of her who once owned it, and who has passed away from the scene for ever.

He seats himself at the window, and looks dreamily over the well-known prospect. The rosy hues of sunset are by this time dying out, and a thin haze is rising from the river, and hanging like a veil over the distant fields and trees.

This is not the reception Ralph has anticipated at Grey Towers. There is something about it that strangely chills and disappoints him.

Alice seemed like his own betrothed love at the first moment. The flush that overspread her face, and the soft glow that rose in her eyes had been unmistakable love and joy. But since that first moment she too has changed, she has grown pale, and cold, as though a blast of chill air has passed over her.

Oh! how he longs for an interview with her, that he may tell her all he has to say, and hear all she must have to tell *him*. *He will wait, and the opportunity will surely come*

by-and-by, perhaps even now she is watching and waiting for him downstairs.

Just then the first dinner-bell sounds, and rouses Ralph to the knowledge that the coming guests will soon arrive. The friendly valise supplies the needful change of dress, and ere long he hurries down, hoping he may have a brief meeting with Alice before the people come.

But no. The rooms are silent and solitary. Wax lights are throwing their rays on a scene altogether new to him.

Were these Aunt Hetty's rooms? Paint and gilding, furniture and curtains, statuettes and pictures, articles of vertu, and heaps of costly ornaments make a wonderful difference in the look of the place.

Leonard Thwaites had been struck with the magical change, and Ralph is ten times more so. He looks sadly about the rooms, feeling everything is altered now, and he, the true owner of the place, is an alien, an intruder, and an unwelcome guest there.

This feeling haunts him, though at the moment he can hardly give a definite reason for the impression that intrudes itself so painfully into his mind.

Not till a carriage drives up to the door, and the voices of coming guests are heard in the hall, does Mrs. Burges think it necessary to come into the room, and then she sweeps in—*sweep* is the word to express her dignified mode of entrance—with a long train of black velvet, half a yard long, behind. She has her friends to welcome then, for the footman has just announced them, and she takes no notice of Ralph; perhaps she does not see him in the shade of the window curtains.

Alice comes in soon after. She wears her white Llama dress, despite Laura's remonstrance, for the lady's-maid strongly suspects her young mistress has "one of them nasty colds again, that always make her eyes look so red and swollen." She also wears her "aqua marine" ornaments; the latter her mother has almost insisted she shall put on.

"It will look very marked, Alice, if you only wear Sir Stanley's betrothal gifts when he is present."

"I don't need the gifts to remind me of the betrothal, mamma," replies Alice, in a voice that is almost bitter in its tones.

Mrs. Burges notes the tone, but it does not suit her to pretend she does just then—so she says, cheerfully—far *too* cheerfully to be natural under the circumstances—

"I'm rejoiced to hear you say that, Alice ; and *so* pleased at such an avowal. You never must forget your engagement, nor how fortunate you have been—most fortunate, I consider !"

So Alice has put on the ornaments, and has come down, looking as cold as her sea-tinted gems.

Mrs. Burges finds a place for her daughter beside Mrs. Leslie, and that lady at once opens a rippling volley of conversation, or rather small talk.

"I don't see Philip here this evening?"

"No, he went to the archery meeting at Slopeley, and will not return home to-night."

"Ah ! I suppose he remains to the evening gathering. How absurdly stingy they have been about the invitations. We only had three sent us—papa, and two of the girls went. Rosa, and Helen, and Maggie were in despair about it, so I brought them here as a sort of consolation. Not but what they always thoroughly enjoy an evening here," adds Mrs. Leslie, suddenly recollecting her speech may be considered just a little uncomplimentary to the present entertainment.

Then other guests come in, and ere long Ralph is requested to lead the eldest Miss Leslie down to dinner.

He can only get a partial glimpse of Alice as she sits down at the lower end of the table, with a huge vase of exotics before her. He thinks she still looks pale and cold, as though she had not yet recovered from the sudden *chill*.

The interview Ralph so longs and hopes for does not take place that evening. There are just enough guests to make conversation general, and Alice is never for an instant alone. Ralph, who is above scheming, and planning, and intriguing, and plotting, does not notice Mrs. Burges' artful management, nor how skilfully the maternal precautions are exerted to prevent such an event.

He cannot say one word to Alice without its being heard by other ears, and his habits of courtesy prevent his intruding himself on the notice of strangers. So he does violence to his inclinations, conceals his impatience, and finally relapses into silence.

Meanwhile he watches Alice, and sees she is not one whit more animated than he is himself; so he is glad when the visitors begin to withdraw, for then he will have more chance of telling Alice all his heart so craves to utter.

But no, when the last guest leaves the room, Mrs. Burges comes over to him, and holds out her hand.

"Now I won't be unreasonable, and keep you up any longer, Mr. Burges."

"I am not tired, thank you," asserts Ralph.

"Oh! you must be weary after your journey to-day, and the long voyage before that. I'm sure you need a good night's rest, to recruit yourself a little. Pray don't hurry yourself to rise early in the morning. My husband won't be here till after eleven o'clock. Come, Alice, come, my child, you look tired also."

Alice holds out her hand at once, without looking up, and what can Ralph do but press it, hope better opportunities of conversing with her will come to-morrow, and then take his departure upstairs, to Aunt Hetty's room?





CHAPTER XIX.

OLD FRIENDS.

THE next morning Mrs. Burges and her two youngest sons are in the breakfast-room when Ralph comes down. The former—who feels an intense sensation of relief rising in her mind now the time of Tom's return draws so near—is inclined to be much more gracious and communicative to her guest.

She leaves off the ceremonious manner of last night, and exclaims in a burst of geniality,—

“Don't you think my boys have grown, Ralph? We don't treat you as a stranger, you see. I always have them in to breakfast with me when we are without visitors.”

“They are indeed fine big fellows now. I should hardly have known them,” returns he, answering the first part of her speech, and shaking hands heartily with the curly-headed youngsters.

“Ah! time makes changes in us all,” says Mrs. Burges, with a sentimental sigh. “You discover many alterations about this place, I dare say?”

“I certainly do.” He looks quickly towards the door, for he hears the handle turn, but it is only the footman bringing in coffee.

They all draw round the table, and Mrs. Burges pours out the fragrant beverage, and Ralph sips and sips, and *watches*, wondering where Alice is.

At last his impatience masters him, and he says,—

“I hope Alice is well this morning ; where is she?”

“Oh, she’s quite well, thank you ; but she is a sad, lazy girl in the mornings, and doesn’t come out of her room till breakfast is half over. She’ll be here presently,” and as she speaks Alice comes in, looking more dispirited than ever.

She must have passed a disturbed night, for her eyes are heavy, and look as though they had had no sleep.

She shyly holds out her hand to Ralph, then passes on, and slips into the vacant chair that stands beside her mother.

If Alice is dull this morning, Mrs. Burges makes up for it in a degree, by being all animation.

With wonderful loquacity she rattles on about every possible subject, but those nearest the hearts of the listeners ; for Ralph has grown silent too, and wonders what sort of a spell is creeping over him, and why everything is so different to what he expected.

When breakfast is over—it has been little more than a form to any of them except the two boys—Mrs. Burges begins to cater for Ralph’s special entertainment.

“I’m sure you will like to make a visit of inspection, and see all that has been done to the place. Don’t stand on ceremony, but go and take a view of everything. Alice and I are going to be very busy this morning, so you must excuse our accompanying you.”

“Won’t your work wait a little?” asks Ralph, turning towards Alice ; but her mother answers quickly for her,—

“Oh, no ; she has letters to write that must be sent off by the early post.”

“Are they so very important?” urges he.

Mrs. Burges laughs affectedly.

“Now, Ralph, I can see you are like most other gentlemen I know ; you won’t allow ladies’ letters *can* be important ; but suppose they are made up of gossip and scandal?”

“Important !” echoes he, catching at the word in the sentence that impresses him at the moment.

"Important ! never did a thirsty man long for water in a desert more eagerly than I longed for Alice's letters when I was away. They brought me intense happiness in a land where all was strange and lonely."

Mrs. Burges sees her mistake at once. How unfortunate she should have introduced this subject of all others ! But she recovers herself instantly, and exclaims with forced vivacity,—

"I suppose when people are in foreign countries they value the merest trifle that reaches them from England. Come, Alice, despite Ralph's protest, you must set about your letters at once, or they won't be ready. Victor, you may go out with Mr. Burges, and show him all papa has been doing."

Alice has left the room by this time, so Ralph takes the boy's hand, and walks across the hall, and down the steps, Mrs. Burges standing at the breakfast-room door, nodding and smiling at them till they are out of sight.

Victor has a great deal to show his companion. The stables are a never-failing source of enjoyment to him ; he knows the names and points of every horse there, what they cost, and where they were bought ; and Ralph looks quietly on, while the boy talks away to his heart's content.

Squire Burges has made marvellous alterations, there is no doubt about that. From the winding paths through the clumps of evergreens to the vinery, the aviary, and orchis house—everything shows successful endeavour in making the most of the place. Aunt Hetty's later life has been one of saving, and hoarding, and preserving ; the new comer seems equally as much bent on spending, and using, and altering.

"I could not have done the thing half as completely," thinks Ralph, with humility, as he stands on a hill looking down at Grey Towers. "These ingenious contrivances would never have entered my thoughts. I wonder how Tom *got to understand* it all. What money it must have cost !"

They are outside the lodge gates now, and are on the way to Eastown.

"I am going for a longer walk, Victor; are you too tired to venture?"

"How far shall you go, Mr. Burges?"

"To the church; is that too long a distance for you?"

"I think it is, for our groom has promised I shall have a ride on 'Khedive,' the new horse, this morning."

"Very well, then. Good-bye, Victor; take care of your bones, and don't tumble off 'Khedive.'"

Ralph's train of thought is not a composed one as he walks briskly down the road. He cannot half understand how things are going on at Grey Towers.

Mrs. Burges seems to be acting a part, though what the drift of her pretence is, he cannot in the least make out.

Is that flaunting of her grandeur before his eyes intended to show how much circumstances have altered their position towards him?

Alice is a greater puzzle still. Surely she is not actuated by the same mean, despicable pretence also. If so, she must be greatly changed. After the first gush of true, impulsive feeling, when he seems to catch the light of unalterable love and faith from her eyes, when he almost reads the very depths of her heart, a change has come over her.

She has become cold, reserved, and silent. Now and then he catches a glance of mute entreaty from her eyes, that makes him long to burst the barrier of restraint that has arisen between them, and determines him to ask an explanation. But there has been no opportunity yet; perhaps, when Tom returns, all will come right again.

Despite all Mr. Atkin has said against him, Ralph still implicitly believes in Squire Burges.

In those faraway days, when Aunt Hetty and Leonard Thwaites had entertained very decided and far from favourable opinions of him, Ralph had been too young to form,

as they did, a correct judgment of Tom's character, and his elders never talked on the subject before him.

And so he has gone on through life, trusting his kinsman and relying in his integrity. He firmly believes Tom tried to act as intercessor between himself and his aunt, but failed in the attempt. And though the affair of the will puzzles him greatly, he still does not hurl blame and condemnation on Tom in the measure the lawyer thinks he deserves.

With regard to the missing letters. It has never once entered his mind that Alice's father has had any hand in the matter.

When Ralph reaches Eastown churchyard, he soon discovers the object of his search—Aunt Hetty's grave. It is close by the entrance pathway, a solid, massive, marble structure, with only her name, and the date of her death, upon it.

The sunlight falls full on the gold letters, and Ralph reads the few words with a sigh, and thinks a tender sentence of regret, such as loving hearts frame to the memory of the departed, would have been a fitting tribute to her memory. Or a sacred text, to arrest the attention of passers-by, and remind them of their inevitable doom, would not have been misplaced. These are old village customs, and he likes them.

While Ralph stands by the marble tomb, musing on all this, and thinking too, kind, loving remembrances of his aunt, who, though capricious, has ever been a true friend to him, the church bells chime out a merry wedding-peal, and presently a happy pair emerge from the building, their faces all smiles and blushes, their white kid gloves, fresh and new, but fitting with uncomfortable restraint on their unaccustomed hands.

A little train of gaily-dressed village lads and lasses bring up the rear. The path is strewn with roses and gilly-flowers, pinks and southernwood, and the children, who

have brought this tribute from their cottage gardens, stand round the church door, watching the gay procession.

A wedding always attracts a degree of curiosity. Ralph is looking at the group, when Mr. Thwaites and Richard Gurling come out of the church, they also smiling and talking cheerily, as they walk down the pathway. They feel no doubt a kindly interest in the youthful pair who have just begun their new life together by treading out the perfumes of the spring flowers, so thickly strewed along their way.

A stranger lingering beside Aunt Hetty's grave was sure to attract Leonard's notice. As he comes nearer his glance rests on the stranger's face.

"Surely I ought to know that face—it is—yes, I'm sure it must be Ralph Burges," exclaims he, stopping.





CHAPTER XX.

DOES HE KNOW?

“**M**R. THWAITES, I believe?” Ralph adds the last word after a slight pause; he can for the moment hardly realize this middle-aged man, with hair rather grey, figure rather stooped, and thin, is the good-looking, robust, healthy, hearty man he has last seen as a college student.

But the cordial smile convinces him it *is* Leonard and no other, so they shake hands cordially, and there is a ring of genuine pleasure in their voices at the unexpected meeting.

“You are staying at Grey Towers, I conclude?”

“Yes, I slept there last night. This is only the third day I have been in England. I returned home in the *Severn*.”

“Home!” The word strikes Ralph the moment he has uttered it, and a quick shadow passes over his face.

“You are coming to see us next?” says Leonard, glancing at the tombstone.

“No, to tell truth I had no such intention just now. Of course I supposed you were still living in Eastown—though no one at Grey Towers alluded to the fact.”

“I dare say not. Will you walk down to the village with me? Gertrude will be very pleased to see you.”

“Rather early to call on a lady, is it not?”

“My wife won’t mind that in the least. Do come. I

shall be glad to introduce you to her ; she has heard of you so often."

Thus urged, Ralph comes down on the pathway, and walks towards the village with the two clergymen.

"They have made you rector of Eastown, long before this, I hope?"

"No indeed. I am still the curate ; my coadjutor is the rector's nephew. Beg pardon, I should have introduced you before."

Mr. Gurling, a tall, slight young man, a little shy, a little awkward in consequence, a little reserved, with clever-looking black eyes, peering through spectacles ; with black hair and pale complexion, shakes hands, and utters a few commonplaces about the rapid voyage the *Severn* has made.

"Yes, we arrived fully two days before we were expected."

"Did you like Australia?"

"Very well, latterly, but at first I found it rather hard work getting on there."

"I suppose parts of it are rather too crowded and overdone?"

"That may be the case in some districts, but I found no reason to complain of overcrowding where I was."

Then, Mr. Gurling supposing himself to be "*de trop*," remembers an engagement he has in the parish, and leaves the relatives to continue their walk together.

"Do you make a long stay here?" asks Leonard.

"I really cannot tell you ; circumstances must decide that," is the reply in rather a dubious tone.

"Has Tom returned from London yet?"

"He is expected back this morning ; by-the-by, my visit to your house must not be a long one, for I particularly want to see him."

"I won't detain you a minute longer than you wish ; we haven't far to go now." Leonard turns up the dingy street, and presently stops at his own door.

Gertrude is at the moment in the study, with Harry and Lenny, who are getting their lessons ready.

Mr. Thwaites portions them out an hour of his time every morning; the only stipulation is that the subject he gives them shall be carefully prepared beforehand.

So Gertrude, knowing the habits of boys, and with a due appréciation of the value of her husband's time, generally goes to them to see they are ready before their father comes. She is seated in the arm-chair, Lenny's book in her hand, the boy standing flushed and impatient before her.

"Now, Lenny, repeat that for the third time. Who was Columbus and what did he discover?"

"He was a native of Genoa; as he was sailing in quest of the Indies by a western course, he found the new world, and Spain became mistress of a larger possession than Rome ever had in the height of her glory."

Careless Lenny masters it at last, then Gertrude turns to Harry, who is watching his brother with a superior air.

"Are you quite sure you know your lessons, Harry?"

"Try me, mamma; I'm not a big baby like Lenny; I can learn them for myself and don't require coaching."

"I don't expect you half know them," exclaims Lenny, aggrieved at the imputation cast on him.

"May I say them to you, mamma?"

"Oh yes! I shall be glad to hear you repeat them."

Harry accordingly recites his pages without a mistake, in a slow methodical way; then turns with cool triumph to Lenny,—

"There now; doesn't that prove I can do without help? I wouldn't be selfish, and take up all mamma's time."

"I'm not selfish; indeed I'm not," asserts Lenny, half ready to cry.

"Hush, Harry; I won't have you tease your brother; it is not kind, and Lenny, take my advice, and avoid leaving room for such accusations in future. Give a *little more time* to preparing your lessons; read them

over more carefully, and then see what the result will be."

Just then Leonard throws open the door, and reveals the "tableau." Gertrude in the midst of her boys ; she talking in an earnest, low tone, and they listening eagerly, each of them a little convinced by the mild reproof she has given them.

"This looks like 'home' at last ; a true domestic scene, without pretence or sham," thinks Ralph, as he goes forward to be introduced.

Mrs. Thwaites holds out her hand with a smile.

"It seems so strange really to *see* you, Ralph, for though your name has ever been a household word with us, your personal identity has seemed more like a myth than anything else."

"He has come now, and better late than never," laughs Leonard. "I hope you will be good friends now you have met."

"Oh yes ! I am sure we shall," retorts Gertrude, as she catches a glance of Ralph's kindly eyes, and sees his pleasant smile.

"It seems only a short time ago since I heard of Leonard's marriage to the pretty Miss Ashton," asserts Ralph gallantly.

"A short time ! Why it's years and years ago, Ralph ; I have a daughter nearly grown up now, and the Miss Ashton that was has lost all her beauty, and become almost an old woman."

Both gentlemen laugh at her vivacity ; Ralph begins to protest playfully against part of her speech, but ends rather gravely, as he adds,—

"Time passes rapidly, I confess ; the years I passed in Australia seem half forgotten already, and this coming to England appears like the real, true life after all."

"Have you returned to settle in England ?" asks Gertrude.

"I hope so ; I have no thought of going abroad any more."

But a shadow passes over his face, so visible to both Gertrude and Leonard, that they quickly change the subject of conversation, and talk on indifferent matters.

They will not appear to force Ralph into a confidence he appears unwilling or unable to give.

Ere long Ralph rises to go.

"I must not stay long now, but I promise you a longer visit next time."

"We shall always be glad to see you, Ralph, for though we have not personally met before, I have long looked on you as one of the family," says Gertrude, warmly, as he takes leave and Leonard seconds her invitation.

"Come to us whenever you feel inclined, my dear fellow ; look on this house as a second home, for, believe me, you will always be most welcome here."

They all walk out in the passage together, with kind, hearty words, and kind hearty hand-shaking, each of them feeling cordial and glad at even that short meeting.

Gertrude stands looking after Ralph as he walks down the street with a quick step ; then closes the door with a sigh.

"Poor Ralph !" exclaims she, when she returns to the study and finds Leonard there alone.

"Why do you call him 'poor Ralph,' in such a dejected tone?"

"Because I pity him from my very heart, and I pity poor Alice also. Oh ! how happy they would have been together ; but this odious marriage will spoil all, and half break their hearts."

"Ralph doesn't seem heartbroken ; I think he bears it very bravely indeed."

"But does he know of it, Leonard ? I'm sure he does not ; he has never heard a word about it yet."

"Surely you don't think they would deceive him, Gerty ?"

"Not deceive him, perhaps ; but I can see no one has told him. Tom and Philip are away from Grey Towers. Mrs. Burges would never have the moral courage to make such a revelation, and Alice—"

"Perhaps Alice has told him."

"Never, Leonard. I am sure she has not. Ralph would never smile and look as he does, had he learned of the great sorrow that has come into their lives. Oh ! how grieved I am for them both !" and Gertrude's eyes fill with quick tears.

"I don't think poor Aunt Hetty's wealth has brought unmixed good to Tom's family after all."

"It has spoilt Alice's life and Ralph's also."

"Don't say that, Gerty. It would be a terrible thing if disappointment had power to spoil every life it overshadows. I trust Alice will yet rise superior to all her youthful troubles, and ere long learn where to find enduring strength. I am sure Ralph knows the secret already ; his is a true-hearted noble nature, unselfish, and full of high impulses. Sorrow will but lead one like he is to cling in faith nearer and nearer to the abiding Trust."

Presently Gertrude asks,—

"Have you heard when the wedding is to take place, Leonard ?"

"Gurling, who seems to possess Sir Stanley's confidence, tells me it will be in ten days."

"So near as that ! Oh ! I am so glad the Rector of Slopeley will officiate, and that you will not be called on."

"Don't congratulate yourself too soon, Gerty. We are all to 'assist.' Mr. Hind, Gurling, and myself."

"Will they be married at Slopeley church ?"

"No, at Eastown, their parish church. I suppose all will be settled when Tom and Sir Stanley return from London."

"Unless Alice and Ralph take the settling into their own hands, and get married despite all obstacles."

"That isn't likely. When a young lady's 'trousseau' is all prepared, when settlements are drawn out—and a titled bridegroom is on one side—a poor obscure lover on the other—things generally end as the world expects and calls wisest."

"I suppose you are right, Leonard, but I'm *so* sorry."

"So am I. But here are Harry and Lenny coming to their lessons. Well, boys! I hope you know them correctly to-day."

"Yes, papa," echo both boys. Harry without his brag, and Lenny with recovered cheerfulness. So Mrs. Thwaites goes out, and leaves them to their studies.





CHAPTER XXI.

THE SQUIRE CONGRATULATES HIMSELF.

NEVER has Mrs. Burges watched more anxiously for her husband than she does on this particular morning.

She longs to throw the burden of responsibility off her own shoulders on to his stronger ones. It is quite a relief to her mind as she sees him riding round the lawn. He is slowly walking his horse, and talking rather loudly to a groom at his side.

"Oh, Tom, I'm so glad you've come back, for I've some news for you," whispers she, as she runs out to meet him in her garden hat.

"Then your news must keep for a while, for I'm going round to the stables; the groom tells me 'Khedive' has hurt one of his knees. Something or other is always sure to go wrong when I'm away. Tell me your news when I come back."

The groom has walked on out of hearing. So Mrs. Burges says in an aggrieved tone,—

"You'd had far better stop and hear it now, for it concerns you quite as much as it does me."

Tom sees symptoms of a rising storm in his wife's face, so he calls back the groom, dismounts, throws the reins to him, and leads the way down one of the new winding walks

in the shrubbery. When they are out of sight of the house, and the tender green leaves of the chestnut trees are closing them in like a tremulous screen, Tom turns round abruptly to his wife,—

“What’s your wonderful news now, Hannah? Nothing bad, I hope.”

“Oh! Tom, a visitor has been here.”

“So I suppose. You told me before the Leslies and Hunts were coming to dinner last evening. It was hardly necessary to stop me to repeat that.”

Tom waxes impatient at Mrs. Burges’ hesitation. The poor woman is wondering how she can bring out the unwelcome truth in the most softened manner.

“Not *that* kind of visitor at all. Ralph Burges has been here.”

“Ralph Burges!” Tom turns on his heel with an expression towards Ralph far more emphatic than polite. If a sudden pallor comes over his face, it may perhaps be due to the bright tints of the young green leaves that dance and flutter between him and the broad blue sky.

“What in the world has brought that fellow here again?”

“I did not ask him, Tom. He came here last night, and is now gone out for a walk.”

“Slept here, I suppose?”

“Yes, I gave him Aunt Hetty’s room. I was obliged to ask him to stay, you know.”

“Well, I hope there was no nonsense again between him and Alice? You used to encourage that once, I recollect.”

“But not now, Tom. I’m quite as much alive to our daughter’s interests as you are, and never left them alone together for a single minute—now, I turn over the whole affair for you to settle—my hands are clear of it, thanks be!”

Tom quiets down when he sees his wife is really angry, and asks more mildly,—

“Where do you say Ralph is gone? Perhaps I had better go out and meet him.”

“*Victor says he went down to Easttown church.*”

"Ah! to see Aunt Hetty's tomb, I suppose. He will find I've done handsomely by that, and spared no expense. Where is Alice?"

"Up in the tower boudoir. She's been there ever since breakfast."

"So much the better. Stanley won't be down from town till the six o'clock train, and I hope the coast will be clear long before that."

"What do you mean to do about it, Tom?"

"I hardly know, Hannah. It's a most vexatious affair altogether. Why couldn't the fellow remain where he was? Nobody wanted him in England."

Tom goes away without further word, forgetting the fatigue of his journey, forgetting poor "Khedive," whom Victor and the grooms have somehow brought to grief, and who stand drooping and trembling in the stable, with a broken knee, and thus it comes to pass, that when Ralph arrives at the slope from whence the first view of Grey Towers is visible, he sees its master coming rapidly up the road.

Tom wears his travelling dress, and has his whip still in his hand. As he walks along, he gives a switch every now and then at the hedges, as though he is beating down some invisible foe.

The exercise does him good, it works off some of his pent-up vexation, and helps him to compose his mind a little.

But he has been too much accustomed to the handling of Ralph's affairs to shrink from having another grapple with them. Ralph has hitherto been so confiding, so tame a victim, that in his heart Tom feels half inclined to despise him, and to feel more than ever *great* in his superior powers of "finesse," subtlety and shrewdness.

Nothing can be more bland and beaming than the expression of Tom's face when they at last meet. He holds out his hand, and grasps his kinsman's with a firm clutch.

"I thought I should find you somewhere near."

"Then you came out purposely to meet me?" says Ralph.

"Of course I did. I've never even entered the house. Hannah told me you were gone towards the church, so I thought I couldn't miss you. So you've come to old England again! Do you stay long this time?"

"The remainder of my days, I hope."

"All right and fair that, if you've made enough to settle down on. I always say when a man has made a fortune, he deserves his rest."

"I haven't made my fortune, though," replied Ralph, smiling. "I found it up-hill work enough in the bush. But when I got into Mr. Curtis' employment, things went on better. I had a regular salary, but not enough to save a 'fortune' from."

"Why in the world then did you throw up a certainty?"

Ralph looks at his kinsman as if meditating what reply to make, so Tom takes up his speech again.

"At your time of life, for you are already past the first prime of youth, it would have been wise to stick to a good thing when you had it."

"Do you think so?" Ralph still appears to be musing, and there is silence for a minute or so.

"Don't be dispirited by my words, Ralph; I am much older than you are, and therefore privileged to give advice," adds the squire, in a tone that has somewhat of apology in it.

"Oh! I am not dispirited by your words, I am sure they have truth and good sense in them," Ralph replies, as though his thoughts are rather wandering away from the present scene and subject.

He longs to speak of Alice, and to express all his thoughts and hopes. But the squire exclaims as if anticipating his purpose,—

"You have come down to Grey Towers at a good time, for there is a wedding at hand. I hope you will stay for it," and Tom laughs spasmodically.

"A wedding! who is going to be married?"

"What! hasn't Hannah told you, nor Alice either? Ah! these womenkind! they love to affect the greatest reserve on the very things that are never out of their thoughts one moment. So they have left me to proclaim the good news, have they? You must know then, my daughter is to be married to Sir Stanley West, a baronet, one of a good old family, next week."

"Do you mean your daughter Alice?" asks Ralph, with a start.

"Of course I do, what other daughter have I? All my other children are sons, you recollect," and Tom laughs.

Ralph feels as if he must burst out into a passion of words—his heart rises in a tumult of excitement, that makes brow and pulse throb wildly. For one minute he is not master of himself, and he knows it, and remains still and silent while the storm passes over him; the only outward signs of which are his trembling limbs and flushed face.

He looks down at the fields, green with their brightest emerald tints, he sees the river that flashes along like molten silver in the sunlight, seeing all these things with a vivid distinctness almost painful just then.

All is calm, and blessed, and peaceful while he feels as if mind, and thought, and heart are in wild commotion.

"But for the grace of God I should have told Tom all I thought," mused he, in after days. "But for *His* restraining power I would have flashed Aunt Hetty's last will before his eyes, and have desired him to give up the place at once. I would have hurled him from it without pity or pardon. Alice, my Alice going to be married to another, and I invited to be present at the wedding!"

For one minute only does this wild surging and swelling at his heart continue. The conflict is over ere it takes time to tell of it—then tender thoughts of Alice come over him, and he is half melted to tears.

Poor child! he will not be cruel to her—he will not injure

a hair of her head, nor plant one sorrow needlessly in her heart. So dear was she to him—so dear is she now, that a mist comes over his eyes and hides the river, and fields, and Tom from his sight.

That worthy has walked on slowly, prudently silent, and he does not look back to see what has made Ralph pause so suddenly in the midst of the road.

He has struck the blow, and can wait to see what effect it has had. He is ready to take up the *offensive* or *defensive* as the case may require.

At last Ralph walks a few steps quickly, and overtakes the squire. He begins to speak, but his voice sounds strange, even to himself. This is what he says:—

“You recollect, Mr. Burges, Alice and I were once engaged to each other?”

“Of course, my dear fellow, I remember it, and the remembrance causes me much pain.”

“Why, may I ask?”

“Because I know how trying a thing of that kind often proves. No doubt my daughter was much attached to you in those days, but girls often don’t know their own minds—time and absence work many changes. Now I do not claim one whit higher qualities for Alice than usually fall to the lot of young ladies. Without impugning for one moment her constancy to you, while she was engaged to you, I must tell you she is equally as constant to Sir Stanley now.”

“But our engagement was never really broken off?”

The squire shrugs his shoulders and makes a deprecatory gesture.

“Not in actual words perhaps, but you drifted apart, as many others do. New interests have been awakened in Alice’s heart, and I entreat you, as her father can entreat, not to disurb them now.”

“But I must talk to Alice, and hear what she says on the *subject*, Mr. Burges.”

"I thought you had seen her already. Doesn't her manner show you I am right?"

Ralph is silent, and Tom's quick eye detects the varied emotions that pass over his face. Crafty and wily as he is, he begins to congratulate himself on having managed the affair rather dexterously after all.

"Had I not appealed to his feelings, and taken up a friendly tone with him, he would have turned out difficult enough!" muses Tom, as they slowly walk on towards Grey Towers.

Showing that worldly and unprincipled as he is, he yet understands the workings of Ralph's higher and better nature.

"Mr. Burges, I shall be more satisfied when I hear the truth from Alice's own lips."

"Nothing can be more reasonable than that, Burges. I'll promise you a speedy interview with her, and I hope she'll be able to persuade you to stay to her wedding after all."

Then the squire adroitly changes the subject, and grows communicative about his estate.

He airily points out the changes he has made, and those he still intends to make. Here, a large piece of ground has been reclaimed—there, a plantation has been projected—here a field has been drained on a new principle—there, some trees have been cut down, and again in that copse, other trees are marked out for the axe.

And the man who has power to snatch every inch of this property out of his grasp, listens dreamily to his speech, and makes no sign.





CHAPTER XXII.

A LAST INTERVIEW.

THE great difficulty now is preparing Alice for the promised meeting, and the squire consults his wife about it.

"If Alice wasn't the utter idiot she is, she would see we are only thinking of her interest all along. Ralph told me not half an hour ago, he has returned to England nearly as poor as he went away," says he testily.

"That may be quite true, Tom, but Alice would not think one bit the worse of him for that. In my opinion she loves him still."

The squire's wrath bursts out at this speech. He utters many things that, from old experience, his wife knows she had better not even reply to. At last he finishes his exordium by exclaiming,—

"Perhaps you are in league with Alice, and want to bring on this folly again?"

"You know I don't, Tom."

"Then why do you hesitate now? Go up and tell Alice, Ralph is in the library waiting to see her; or I declare I'll go up to her myself, and speedily bring her to reason."

"No, no, Tom, there's no need for that. Harsh measures won't do just now, I'm only afraid she'll break down when *she sees Ralph.*"

"Warn her against *that*, mind you do, Hannah."

Mrs. Burges, with a sigh, goes out of the room. It was all very well to be proud of her daughter's intended great match, while her former lover was away out of sight, lost in some foreign land, or dead, perhaps.

But now he has appeared on the scene, fond and faithful as ever; she shrinks from seeing the signs of anguish his presence is sure to cause.

She walks drearily up to the Tower boudoir, wondering what Alice is doing there so long. This is so especially Alice's private apartment, that it has become the custom at Grey Towers not to intrude there without due notice.

So Mrs. Burges taps lightly at the door.

"Come in," says the clear voice in its usual tones, and the lady enters the room.

Alice is in no studied attitude of despair, she is calmly sitting on one of Aunt Hetty's old-fashioned spider-leg chairs, close by the window; the heavy, silk embroidered curtains half hide her from view.

Alice was sitting there when she saw Ralph come in at the lodge gates with her father, and she has made no change in her position since.

Several choice books, dainty pieces of work, writing materials in an elegant desk, suited for the bride-elect, are on the table near her. But for once in her life, Alice has no inclination for any employment, her hands are folded idly on her lap.

"Alice, have you a few minutes to spare?" asks her mother, speaking rapidly, to hide the slight nervousness in her voice.

"Oh, yes, mamma. Don't you perceive I'm not busy?"

"Ralph wishes to see you in the library for a short time, my dear. The interview won't of course last long, and can't be of any importance, for your father has already told him of your intended marriage, indeed, has asked him to the wedding next week."

"Then why does Ralph want to see me?"

"A mere matter of form of course. He merely wants to hear about it from your own lips. You know Ralph always was a little precise and methodical in his ways."

"Does he want me to confess openly how false and un-trustful I have been? Surely he must despise me enough without that confession."

"Don't talk in that strain, Alice. Remember you are now the affianced wife of Sir Stanley West, and act as such on this occasion."

"I will try to do so, mother."

Then Alice rises, and goes down. Mrs. Burges walks a step or two behind her. She does not offer her arm as she did on a former occasion, but she throws open the library door in a manner that reminds Alice of that evening.

Still more is she reminded of it when she sees her father and Ralph inside the room, standing by the fire, and talking.

"Am I very cruel to send for you, Alice?" asks Ralph, as soon as they are alone together. "I cannot rest satisfied till I hear from your own lips whether or not we are henceforth to be strangers to each other."

"I suppose we must be, Ralph," replies she drearily.

"Then all I have heard is true: this marriage takes place with your own consent?"

"Yes, I have given my consent." Her eyes droop under his gaze, for she feels he is watching her intently.

"Then there is nothing more to be said, Alice. My question is fully answered. May you be happy in your choice, and may every blessing, earthly and heavenly, be your future lot!"

"Oh, Ralph! how you must hate and scorn me! I waited so long and anxiously for some sign or token from you, but none came, and then I—"

"Don't trouble to explain, Alice, I understand perfectly. I shall never hate and scorn you though; you were my first *love*, and none other in this world shall take your place.

Now let us part, not as strangers, but as true friends, and if among the changes and chances of life I can ever serve you, I shall feel intense happiness in doing so."

Ralph seizes her hand for a moment, looks down into the very depths of her eyes as though he is taking a last farewell, presses a rapid kiss on her brow, and is gone out of sight.

The morning sun streams in pleasantly through the library windows, forming fantastic patterns on the green carpet, as it shines through the leaves of the delicate acacia-trees outside.

Beyond these trees is the bright blue sky, with great fleecy clouds floating grandly across it ; but Alice does not see this now, she is only conscious of a dull heavy sickness at her heart that makes her rush away to the solitude of her favourite room in the East Tower.

There is more shade up there ; she draws the thick curtains closely over the window, and covers her eyes as she flings herself into the antique chair.

A sense of wrong oppresses her, a sense of injury done her. "How will it end, how will it end?" is her cry as thoughts and regrets flit wildly through her mind.

No need for her to watch from the window to see Ralph's departure ; she knows the last word has been spoken, and that he is gone for ever. Their paths in life will never cross each other again.

The squire is in a woful fidget all the time his daughter and Ralph are together. Perhaps he half expects them to come out, defiant and triumphant, to tell him true love has won its way, and that they are determined to conquer all obstacles.

He would fain send his wife into the library to interrupt the interview, but she objects.

"No, no, Tom, such eagerness on our part would do more harm than good. There, that's Ralph's step now, he's gone up to Aunt Hetty's room, and now he's coming downstairs again."

Tom meets him in the hall, a smile on his lips, as his eyes, with hungry scrutiny, are searching Ralph's face.

His search is satisfactory. Tom's spirits rise at once. It does not need the light valise strapped on his shoulder to tell him this interview with Alice has been a final one.

"Where are you going, Ralph? Why have you got your travelling bag?"

"I must catch the next train, Mr. Burges; it is nearly due."

"Nonsense! Don't run away like that, man! Hasn't Alice been able to persuade you to stay to her wedding?"

"She never even tried to do so."

Tom thrusts his arm inside his kinsman's, and draws him inside the dining-room door.

"Surely you are not leaving us in anger, Ralph?"

"I am not angry, Mr. Burges. But if I tell you I have met with a great sorrow here, you will perhaps understand me. Still, if Alice has chosen for her own happiness, I will not complain."

The squire is ready enough to express sympathy now. He is positively eloquent in his manifold regrets, though he has some trouble in hiding the glow of triumph that flashes from his eyes—some difficulty in concealing his inward satisfaction all the time.

What matter if Ralph is depressed and dejected, that he is leaving Grey Towers, and has not a home in the wide world he can call his own? That is Ralph's affair—not Tom's.

Ralph declines the pressing invitation to luncheon; will not even take the dog-cart to drive him to the station; and ere long finds himself crossing the fields again, treading down the violets, and soft springy wild thyme, though he does not notice the sweet fragrance now.

His step is too rapid for that, his heart too heavy, his brain too confused.

Oh! if the squire had only known of that last will of Aunt Hetty's lying so snugly in the innocent-looking valise, the *parchment* would never have left Grey Towers. Some plan

or other, worked out by his fertile brain, would have wrought its utter destruction.

But all unwary, all unsuspecting, the squire lets it go. He accompanies Ralph to the Lodge gates, and smiles placidly to himself as he watches him stride over the fields with rapid impatient steps.

The danger is over now. Tom rubs his hands with inward satisfaction at the victory his skilful management has secured.

He finds time now to walk round to the stables to see how the unfortunate "Khedive" is getting on ; and finds time, also, to vent his unrestrained wrath on the still more unfortunate groom, who has indiscreetly been the cause of the mischance.

Alice has a bad headache that evening, and declines to come downstairs again, so the squire thinks it best to prevent Sir Stanley's coming to Grey Towers to dinner, as he has promised.

He rides over to the station just in time to encounter the baronet, as he steps out of a railway carriage.

"I don't think I should have left town to-day, had I not engaged myself to dine at Grey Towers," says he quickly.

"I'm sorry you hurried, Sir Stanley, for I'm just come to put you off. Alice is not well, and her mother thinks she had best keep quiet, and get to bed early."

"Nothing serious the matter, I hope?" exclaims the intended bridegroom, with becoming concern.

"Oh, no ! nothing in the least serious. She'll be all right to-morrow, no doubt, and very glad to see you then."

"I think we had better make a compromise, Burges. I'll dine with you to-morrow, if you'll come over to Stourton Hall with me now. It seems hard lines after a man has hurried all the way from London in the hope of having a pleasant evening, to find he is thrust back on his own company after all. Will you come?"

"Certainly, if my company will be any solace," replies the squire, laughing.

"Then jump into the trap with me. My groom shall take your horse to Grey Towers, and explain matters."

Tom, in high spirits, takes his place beside Sir Stanley, and they drive on rapidly through the lanes to the house that is so soon to be his daughter's future home.

He looks round at the fine, somewhat carelessly kept domain, with something like a prospective interest in it, for is not Alice going to be mistress there?

If we say the squire's latent pride and arrogance rise higher within his breast, we shall only say the truth, but he keeps these feelings in check in his intended son-in-law's presence, and tries his utmost to make himself witty and pleasant—a "'solace' for Sir Stanley's disappointment," as he expresses it himself.

Thus the day that began so disturbingly to Tom, ends pleasantly at last, and he assures "Hannah" by-and-by, he has not felt in such capital spirits for a long time past.



CHAPTER XXIII.

WEDDING BELLS.



TEN days after Ralph's departure from Grey Towers, a grand wedding takes place at Eastown Church. Many guests are invited—not "old friends," for the Burges have "none in that neighbourhood," they say.

Six bridesmaids, all in white, with wild flowers in their hair ; a bride, draped in satins and laces, looking amidst all her grandeur pale, cold, and stately ; a bridegroom, who has won his wife by force of will, and who feels elated with full possession now. How often one sees such weddings ! They pour out from fashionable churches in large towns, and the lookers-on gaze with envying eyes on the finely-dressed people. They are even sometimes to be met with in the far-away, rural, peaceful-seeming districts of the country, as Alice Burges' wedding was seen on this bright June morning.

Leonard Thwaites "assists" at the ceremony, and perhaps no one present understands the secret of the bride's paleness better than he does, or feels more truly sorry for her as she stands there with that hard, set face.

If he could only detect one warm blush of shy confusion, or have seen the timid eyes once droop to hide their conscious glow, he would feel more satisfied and more ready to believe her heart and thoughts are in the solemn ceremony.

Only once, when his voice is heard in part of the service, does Alice seem to know of his presence there, and then she looks towards him with such a start !—such a sad, imploring expression in her eyes ! But she soon recovers herself, and goes through her part without once turning her glance towards him again.

Merrily ring out the Eastown bells, waking up the echoes among the hills, floating on the breeze over green corn-fields and down in sunny pastures, clanging through the valleys and across the fields. Men stop their work to listen, and women run out of their houses to hear them more distinctly.

One granny stands with scrubbing-brush in her hand to have a gossip with her next-door neighbour about them.

“That’s Sir Stanley West and the squire’s daughter married to-day. I hear he’s been a long time arter her. Wish ’em good luck, I say ! Her seems a nice, pretty-faced young lady, far too good for the likes of he.”

“I hope her’ll be happier than the first wife was, though I have my doubts. Sir Stanley ain’t mended his manners much, by all accounts,” retorts her friend.

“Humph ! she might well be happier than the first Lady West was, but for all that I wouldn’t envy her. ’Taint always the softest beds that give the sweetest sleep, and there’s many an aching heart covered over with a silken gownd. But, there, listening to wedding-bells won’t finish my scrubbing for me, and I ain’t half done the kitchen yet.” And the woman shuffled away, singing as she went.

Thus the clanging, crashing bells are heard with various comments. Some people only catch the wild, clear, resonant notes of rejoicing ; others hear also the deep, solemn undertones that ever wail even through marriage peals.

Leonard does not go to the wedding breakfast. He is, of course, invited, but declines the invitation, so the Rector of *Slopeley* and Richard Gurling represent the “cloth” on that occasion.

Mrs. Burges remains at home to receive the bridal party. Nothing can exceed the gushing, maternal effusion with which she impresses her first kiss on the bride's chill lips.

"Bless you, my darling ! bless you, Lady West ! There, I'm the very first to call you by your new title," exclaims she, with a triumphant glitter in her eyes.

All that wealth and profusion can do is put in force to make the wedding feast a splendid one, such as has not been seen in the country-side for a long time, and such as shall be remembered for many a day after.

Delicate viands, silver and glass, ripe fruits, and perfumed summer flowers load the tables. Elegant dresses, jewels and laces adorn the bevy of fair young bridesmaids. Regimentals, with heavy gold trimmings, appear here and there, forming, as Mrs. Burges afterwards says, a "*brilliant coup-d'œil*" not to be surpassed for completeness.

Then, later in the day, while the Eastown bells are still chiming out on the breeze, Alice in her rich travelling dress drives away with her husband, to begin the new life "for better for worse" with him.

Gertrude comes to meet Leonard as he returns from the church, and he quickens his pace as he sees her walking along the road under the shade of the trees. The hedges beside her are white with their wreaths of white, perfumy hawthorn ; wild roses, just opening into flower, trail their thorny branches in their own high, perched-up haunts ; and clusters of dog-violets sprinkle the grass with full-blown profusion. Gertrude wears only a clean, fresh gingham morning dress, and a straw hat, trimmed with white ribbon ; yet as she looks up with that bright smile of hers, and those eyes, expressive as when they were owned by the "pretty Miss Ashton," Leonard thinks the fine ladies he has just seen won't bear comparison with his own "bonnie wife ;" but of course allowance must be made for *his* very partial judgment in that case.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Gerty."

"I found I had an hour to spare, so I thought I couldn't employ it better than coming to meet you. The boys have finished rehearsing their lessons, and it's astonishing what little help they require from me now."

"I thought Lenny was rather averse to working alone?"

"He used to be till Harry administered him a rebuke in his own pungent manner. Since then Lenny has exerted himself wonderfully. I never saw a disposition so genial, so teachable, so impressible, so bright as Lenny's is."

Leonard laughs as he replies,—

"Well done, Gerty! Think of the legend, 'Every mother thinks her own,' &c., when you praise up your boy like that."

"But he *is* a dear, affectionate little fellow," persists Gertrude.

"Granted, and I hope his present good qualities will expand and grow brighter as he gets older. My highest ambition for all my boys is that they may become true-hearted men, Christ's faithful soldiers and servants unto their life's end."

Presently Mrs. Thwaites exclaims,—

"I came to hear about the wedding, Leonard?"

"So I thought. What shall I begin about first?"

"How did the bride look?"

"Do you mean how was she dressed? Do you want me to give a description of the white satin, the veil, the wreath, and jewels?"

"No, for I don't fancy you *could* give an accurate account of such matters. But, tell me, how did Alice go through the service?"

"She was very pale and calm—almost unnaturally so. Her nerves seemed to be strung to the utmost tension in her efforts to preserve a rigid manner."

"Poor Alice! poor girl! What a different thing it would be for her if Ralph was the bridegroom! I suppose you *neither saw nor heard anything of him?*"

"No; he seems to have passed away from the scene altogether. I understand he left Grey Towers the same morning he called at our house, though he seemed to have no intention of going away so soon then. Strange, he has never written to me. It seems a complicated affair altogether. I only hope some good may come from it somehow."

"How *can* good come from such a complication?" interrupts Gertrude. "Look at this marriage, for instance. Selfish, worldly-minded people have made it up, and have half broken two loving hearts by doing so. Good can never come from deeds like that! It is in direct opposition to the law of Providence."

"Don't say that, since God permitted it to take place. He works, as we all know, by apparently unlikely means. From our lower stand-point we can't understand all His ways now. Selfish and worldly-minded relatives in olden times sold poor Joseph to the Ishmaelites; none of us would have expected good to come out of *that*, yet it was only one link in the grand eternal chain of events. It was God's plan of giving the world by-and-by David's psalms and David's Son."

Gertrude does not reply; she is making a mental resolve that henceforth, when her own children's names rise in her heart in moments of prayer, Alice's shall be always mingled with theirs. "Oh! that good might yet come to her—lasting good, such as this world can never give nor take away!"

By-and-by, with feminine curiosity, Mrs. Thwaites wishes to know more about the wedding. Who can forget *that* event altogether while the bells are still chiming and ringing out joy peals in their ears?

"Was there a large party, Leonard?"

"About thirty, I should suppose."

"No doubt they will have a sumptuous 'déjeuner.' Oh, Leonard, you foolish fellow; you have put yourself out of all that!"

"It is no loss, my dear. I'd far rather take my cold mutton with you and the children."

"You shall have something better than cold mutton to-day. Only think ! Farmer Wells sent me such a fine barn-door fowl, just ready for the spit, this morning. His present is roasting away at the fire now, and will be quite ready when we get home."

"How kind of Farmer Wells, and how thoughtful too !"

Easttown people have some primitive ways among them, and one fashion of theirs is now and then to share some of their good things with their pastor. Little presents of farm produce, of garden and orchard, sometimes find their way to his house, and Gertrude, who knows the custom, and is not proud, is thankful for these unexpected little helps.

As they draw near their house, Will Edwards, the postman, comes briskly round the corner ; his shrivelled-apple-face looking as rosy and beaming as his coat.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, Edwards ?"

"Up to Grey Towers, sir. The squire's butler told me I was to have some breakfast or dinner, or whatever they calls it, in the servants' hall. I dare say there will be plum-cake and wine, sir."

"I dare say there will. Now mind you don't take too much of the latter, Edwards."

"All right, sir. I'll only just drink the bride and bridegroom's health ; that's all. I left a letter at your honour's house just now."

"Perhaps Ralph has written at last," suggests Gertrude, as they go in at the door.

"This looks like Katie's writing," says Mr. Thwaites, taking up the letter and examining the envelope.

"Again ! She only wrote two days ago. I wonder what she has written about so soon ?"

"Perhaps to tell you when her holidays begin."

Mrs. Thwaites has broken open the letter by this time,

and as she glances over its contents a slight exclamation makes Leonard turn round.

"Nothing wrong I hope."

"Oh, Leonard! Miss Hay is dead. Katie has lost her kind, good godmother."

"Is it possible? How sorry I am! When did she die, Gertrude?"

"Only yesterday; quite suddenly it appears. 'There was no illness nor any expectation of her death, no preparation either. She was alone in her bedroom at the time; they found her senseless there, and she never rallied afterwards,'" reads Gertrude with her eyes full of tears.

"Poor Miss Hay! called so suddenly to her account. What a teaching to us to be 'always ready, always waiting.' No doubt Katie will return home to live with us now."

"I suppose so, dear child; unless Miss Hay has made some arrangement for her remaining longer at school."

"That is hardly likely I think," Leonard replies decidedly. Nevertheless, by-and-by, after dinner, Gertrude brings up the subject again.

"Do you know, Leonard, I don't think it unreasonable to conclude her godmother has made some provision for Katie for finishing her education and helping her on, I mean."

"We must not indulge any expectations of the sort, Gerty, nor form any suppositions from the kindness of our old friend. We must be grateful for what poor Miss Hay has done already for Katie. God grant our child may be none the worse for her long absence from home! I trust she may prove a help and a comfort to us now. Does she say when we may expect her here?"

"At the vacation, I conclude. The letter is a short one—full of regrets at her godmother's death, full of excitement at being with us again. I must see to-morrow about getting the room ready, and putting things in order a little for Katie's arrival."



CHAPTER XXIV.

RALPH'S DECISION.



LONG account of Sir Stanley West's marriage appears in the *Morning Post*, and Ralph Burges, who has been waiting for such an announcement, no sooner glances it over than he bends his steps towards Mr. Atkin's office.

But not with the animated countenance and hopeful heart he had borne there before. A deep sadness shadows his face, and the past ten days have left traces that the lawyer sees at once.

"Dear me! Have you been ill, Mr. Burges? You look terribly pale and thin and haggard. Grey Towers has not agreed with you, I fear. What is the matter?"

"I haven't been quite the thing lately, but I'm better now."

"Well, I've been expecting to hear from you. Are you just come from Grey Towers?"

"I only stayed one night there. I've been in London ever since."

"Indeed! Wasn't Tom astounded when he heard about Aunt Hetty's last will?"

"He has heard nothing of it."

"What! I thought you went down there on purpose to let him know?"

"So I did; but I've changed my mind since."

"How do you mean, Mr. Burges? I'm at a loss to understand your course of action—pray explain it."

"My course is simply this, Mr. Atkin. I have decided *not* to put in my claim to the estate. I shall not disturb Mr. Burges at all."

"My dear sir, pardon me for asking the question, but have you taken leave of your senses altogether? As I told you before, the will now in your possession cannot be set aside; it concerns others besides yourself."

"I am fully aware of that; but it will not injure the other legatees if I allow this document to remain intact during my life."

"Certainly not; it will rather serve them if you contemplate making a speedy departure from this scene; and, indeed, from your present appearance, that seems *not* unlikely. Pardon my bluntness to you, Mr. Burges, but I feel the deepest interest in your case. I was rejoiced you were going to oust Mr. Tom Burges, and now your revelation fills me with surprise. I can't fathom your motives."

"The estate down at Grey Towers seems very ably managed. Mr. Burges understands more about it than I do."

"Granted; but you will soon learn to manage it as he learnt."

"The great household, the tribe of servants, the display, the show, the pomp down there would only be a worry and a vexation to me."

"But you needn't keep up all that nonsense; Mrs. Hetty Burges never did."

"Then Squire Burges has a family of five fine, healthy boys, who will all require settling in the world by-and-by."

Mr. Atkin's patience now fairly gives way, and he bursts out,—

"Oh, if you are grown tender and considerate about Tom Burges' sons, I'll wash my hands of the whole affair. Fine idea that! Resign the estate because his lads want

settling!" Then, after a minute's hesitation, he goes on in a more serious tone,—

"I hope you are not really in earnest, Mr. Ralph; don't run counter to the very leadings of Providence. Here's a scoundrel got possession of a property through foul means, and you seem the very one intended as a scourge to cast him out, and make him suffer for it."

"I shrink from the office of scourge," replies Ralph earnestly. "I would not for the world be the means of thrusting sorrow and suffering into *that* household."

Something in the tone of his voice makes Mr. Atkin fix his penetrating eyes on his face.

"May I ask the cause of this hesitation?"

"Need you probe so deeply, Mr. Atkin? Our motives belong to God, and by them we shall be judged. Perhaps, though, as I have already given you much of my confidence, I ought to give you more; read this."

The lawyer read aloud "the marriage in high life," in the *Morning News*.

"Tom Burges' daughter, I declare! married to a baronet! Tom has ambition enough for anything. I venture to say *that* was some match of his making up. But what has all this to do with you, Mr. Ralph?"

"Only that I was engaged to Alice Burges. She was dear to me as my own life, and I went down to Grey Towers to marry her."

"Ah, I see. This marriage is a stroke of family policy, made up in your absence. Well, you have the scourge in your own hands now; punish them for it as you have the power of doing."

"Alice is dear to me still, and not for worlds would I injure her, or give her an unnecessary heart-throb. I should only cause her bitter grief if I brought down disgrace and ruin on her father, and I cannot, will not do it."

Mr. Atkin makes no reply, so Ralph goes on again,—

"For a long time past I have thought of Alice, and prayed for her as my hoped-for wife ; never for one moment has my affection for her lessened, or my allegiance faltered. Why, then, should I plunge her and hers into wretchedness, when I can avoid doing so? Do you still counsel me to put Aunt Hetty's will in force, Mr. Atkin?"

"You certainly give me a view of the case I never expected. Yet the self-sacrifice you propose is tremendous ; your feeling must be very deep towards the young lady, when you relinquish so much in her behalf."

"Perhaps the sacrifice is not so great as you imagine ; don't give me undue credit," replies Ralph quickly. "What do I, a mere withered branch, require with a cumbersome estate?"

"My dear Burges, don't talk like that ; make allowance for feeling dispirited under this present disappointment. This phase of mind will wear itself out in time ; you will settle down, get married, and be happy with your family round you."

"Never, I shall never marry now."

"Don't be too positive, Burges," and the lawyer smiles.

"No, I shall never marry, and I have no great desire for much of the world's wealth now ; riches and pomp have no charms for me. I seek rather the riches that are eternal, and that will not perish in the using."

"That is the right view, of course—the highest, best view to take—but all men would not think and act as you are doing," the lawyer says drily.

"Perhaps not. I am content to be a fool in the world's eyes, but I cannot alter my plans, for I believe they are the right ones after all."

"If ever you *do* change your mind, you will let me know?"

"Of course, you are the only confidant I have made in the matter."

"Then what do you propose doing with yourself, Mr.

Burges? I conclude you have hardly made your fortune in Australia."

"Not a fortune, certainly, but I have saved some money. My plans are these. A brother of my late employer's, Mr. Thomas Curtis, has given me a post in his iron-works at Radcliff; light pay, and plenty of work, that will just suit me now, for I have no desire to rust my life away."

"Are you going to Radcliff soon?"

"I start by the night-train, and begin work to-morrow, I hope. When my business with you is finished, my business in London is ended. And now I am ready to take any steps you require that this will may come into force after my death, and not till then. Be my life long or short, it shall remain intact during the remainder of my days. I give it into your safe keeping."

Mr. Atkin unfolds many more arguments, tries more cogent persuasions to move Ralph from his purpose, and at last gives up in despair.

"Upon my word, Burges, I could never get courage to do what you are doing."

"Rather to let alone what I am leaving. Ah! you never know till you are tried. Now don't set me up as a hero in your own mind, Mr. Atkin. I am weak, and futile, and feeble. If I trusted to my own strength alone, I should turn into a very demon of revenge, and should work no end of vengeance and desolation in Tom's family. Thank God for His grace that keeps me from that!"

Mr. Atkin is perplexed and puzzled. There is something about Ralph he cannot understand; but he respects and admires him for all that, and a mist comes over his sharp eyes, giving them a look of softness they rarely have, when he finally wrings his hand at parting.

"Instruct me directly you change your mind."

"Aye, that I will. But you won't find me change, Mr. Atkin."



CHAPTER XXV.

A SLIGHT MISUNDERSTANDING.

WHILE it would be tedious to follow Alice through all the scenes and sights she visits during her brief period of London life, one glimpse of her may be given, that will unveil a little of the domestic atmosphere on which she has entered.

Sir Stanley takes it for granted her highest enjoyment must consist in being taken from one fashionable place to another. The London season is not yet over, and his sister, Lady Ann Holding, is found willing to bestow a little of her patronage on his new wife.

Not that Lady Ann particularly admires his choice. She often talks of Alice before her daughters as a "parvenu," as insipid, and insignificant, and many a family discussion takes place on the subject.

The two Miss Holdings are stylish, high-spirited, fashionable girls—fond of show, and very desirous to enter as much as possible into the frivolous amusements of London society.

"We must take some notice of *her* to please your Uncle Stanley. But I must say he ought to have chosen some one more suited to him," is Lady Ann's remark one day.

"What sort of a wife would you have given him, mamma?" asks Katherine, the eldest daughter, laughing.

"Some one who could manage him with a firm hand, and

determined mind—some one who could take the lead in his household, and elsewhere—a woman with a little sparkle, and life, and brightness about her ; not a poor, pale-faced, listless, spiritless, timid girl like Alice is.”

“Surely you must allow she's very pretty, mamma?”

“Yes, Katherine, as far as mere features go, she *is* pretty. But one can easily see she has never been much in society. There is none of the high-bred ease and elegance one might look for in your uncle's wife. Take my word for it, she will dwindle down into a mere piece of inanity like the former Lady West did.”

Lady Holding is sitting in her drawing-room — sitting there rather impatiently too—both she and her daughters are dressed for dinner, and that meal is being delayed past all convenient bounds.

They are waiting for Alice and her husband. Perhaps some of the dispraise the mistress of the house has poured forth on the former is due to her impatient waiting for her guests.

Lady Holding has consulted her jewelled watch a dozen times. At last, altogether losing patience, she exclaims,—

“Ring the bell, Katherine, we must have dinner at once, or we shall never have finished in time for the concert.”

Adelaide, the youngest daughter, has been reading, apparently unheeding the conversation that burst at intervals between her mother and sister. Now she lays down her book with a yawn.

“Perhaps Uncle Stanley never knew you expected him to dinner, mamma?”

“But he *did*, Adelaide, I invited them both particularly, and they promised to go to the concert with us afterwards. I call it very careless of them to disappoint in this manner. What time is Charlie Despard coming?”

“Not till the last minute. Perhaps not till the concert is half over. He never *promised* to come to dinner, so if the fish is boiled to tatters, don't blame him, mamma.”

Dinner passes over without the expected guests, and their absence must now be accounted for.

Alice is dressed, and ready at the appointed minute. With her white cloak on her arm, she seats herself on a low sofa at the window to wait for her husband's return.

Though they have only been married a few weeks, Sir Stanley seems to have discovered many old friends in London, who take up a very considerable portion of his time ; so Alice has already passed many hours alone in the lodgings they have taken at the West end of the town.

"Ann will drive you out in her carriage, with her girls, you know," Sir Stanley has often said, by the way of catering for Alice's amusement in his absence.

But she never has the slightest wish to venture to Lady Holding's uninvited. Some instinct tells her she is not altogether a prime favourite there. She shrinks from the stately patronage of the elder lady, and from the very 'prononcé' demonstrations of the younger ones.

She even prefers sitting alone in the dull lodgings, reading, working, or thinking as the case may be.

On this calm summer's evening, almost the last they are to spend in London, she sits musingly near the window, watching the children play in the square, and the groups of people pass by.

She is sitting there still when the children and their nurses are gone home, when the footsteps on the pavement have grown fewer, and when twilight has shrouded up the trees in one universal tint of grey.

A feeling of languor and weariness steals over her. Dinner has not been ordered at the lodgings, as they are going to Lady Holding's, and Alice has taken no refreshment since the early luncheon.

But she waits on, thinking each coming step will prove to be her husband's.

At last she hears him on the stairs. He opens the door of the room in a hurry, glances round it, and is going out

again, without once perceiving her as she sits in the shade of the curtains at the window.

"How late you are, Stanley!"

"*You* here, Alice? I thought you had gone to my sister's long ago."

"I waited for you to go with me."

"What absurd nonsense that is! As if you could not go alone! You should have ordered the people here to get you a carriage."

"I never thought you would like me to go out to dinner alone. Why did you not tell me you were not coming in till late?"

"How could I tell you what I didn't know myself?" shouts he in a loud tone. "Can't a man be detained at his club without finding his wife moping and waiting for him at home?"

Something has evidently much discomposed Sir Stanley; he has come back in a dreadful temper, and his wife, for the first time in her life, sees him in that undesirable mood.

He rings the bell sharply—orders the man to call him a cab at once—paces about the room furiously, jerking out short excited sentences, in a loud angry manner.

He goes on, "Of course it's too late for dinner now, you might have known that. Ann hates to be kept waiting. Fortunately *I* took my dinner at the club. Ann will wonder what in the world has become of us; the concert will be half over. Are you ready now, Alice?"

The last words are blurted out just as the cab drives up to the door, Alice takes his arm in silence, and they walk down stairs together.

A cold taciturn drive that is! Sir Stanley draws himself far back, and seems in no mood for speaking, and however much his wife may wish for conversation she dares not trust *her voice* to utter a single word. A choking sensation rises *in her throat*—tears will well into her eyes, despite her

endeavour to keep herself calm. In vain she argues to herself, "Stanley does not mean it for unkindness, but he does not know how much that harsh voice and abrupt manner has power to upset me. Perhaps I was foolish, and childish to wait so long, but the idea of ordering a carriage, and going out alone never once entered my mind."

All her reasoning cannot keep back the obstinate tears, and it is *so* hard to hide them with only that wretched little handkerchief she holds in her hand. Broad Honiton lace all round, with a couple of square inches of cobweb cambric in the middle! Still she covertly presses it to her eyes, with her white-gloved fingers, and hopes her husband will not perceive her emotion.

She tries in vain to look composed when the glare of light falls on her in that concert-room. The first part of the performance is over, and she and her husband enter just at the short interlude between.

Lady Holding turns round to greet them with scrutinizing glance, and her daughters turn round to stare also. Several people have joined the Holdings' party now, and Adelaide leans across Charlie Despard to whisper to her sister—"Seems to me as if they had had a tiff on the way here."

"Nonsense, Adelaide, the honeymoon is hardly over yet."

"Oh! I don't think Uncle Stanley would stand on ceremony about that. He's not my ideal of a model husband." and Adelaide laughs as Mr. Despard protests he can hear every word she is saying.

Lady Holding greets the new arrivals with a smile. Her annoyance is seemingly over now, for she is one who never shows that "sort of thing" in public.

Directly her brother has assured her no misfortune has happened to keep them away from dinner, she begins to talk on other subjects, glancing all the while, rather curiously, at Lady West's tell-tale face and red eyes. Then she whispers softly to her,—

"Sit a little nearer me, my dear, and you won't be quite so much in the full glare of the gas. It is very trying to the eyes when one comes in from the dark street. Have you ever heard Beethoven's Symphony in C. Minor? Madame Espine plays it exquisitely."

"I am not sure that I've heard it," falters Alice.

"Then you'll have a treat presently. The next part begins with it. I suppose you often play Beethoven's pieces, most musical people do?"

"Alice hardly puts in a claim to be called musical," Sir Stanley says, smoothing his brow, and smiling a little.

"Why not? I'm sure she plays very sweetly indeed. A little more practice will make her a capital performer," asserts his sister, in a patronizing tone, with which her evident look of pity is rather hard to bear.

The expressive face, trying so much to appear calm, the trembling lip, the tearful eyes, makes Stanley's sister feel sorry for Stanley's wife.

It is to her like a chapter from the old story over again—a passage from the history of her brother's first married life repeated. She would far rather have seen Alice haughty, defiant, self-possessed—anything but the gentle, yielding, sensitive girl she seems to be.

"Alice can practise as much as she likes down at Stourton Hall. There will be plenty of opportunity there. You will try to become a first-rate performer in time, won't you, Alice?" asks Sir Stanley.

Just then Madame Espine appears, and Alice feels so glad the attention of everybody is turned to her playing. She can close her burning eyelids for a moment, and strive to keep down that weary throbbing at her heart.

She knows it is all very foolish of her, and no one can blame her more than she blames herself, but it is so hard to get rid of the wretched feeling that has come over her.

The very music seems a discord. She will never like

that symphony again ; it will always be associated with the recollection of her unhappiness and mortification, caused by her husband's first unkind words.

This is the first approach to a quarrel that takes place between husband and wife during their stay in London ; but the remembrance of it lingers in Alice's mind for many a long day afterwards.

Sir Stanley is proud of his young wife. He loves her as much as it is in his hard, selfish nature to love any one. Yet this glimpse of his temper shows Alice what he may become when the first glamour of his affection for her is over—and indifference, and doubt, and distrust begin to mingle in her thoughts towards him.

Soon afterwards they return to the country—to Stourton Hall—which, though some of its grounds join and intermingle with the squire's estate, is yet situated at some distance from Grey Towers.

The Hall is about two miles from Eastown. It lies far back from the public road, with a thick dark wood at some distance behind it, where the huge trees make twilight even in the brightest day.

Perhaps this causes the house to appear gloomy, or perhaps the high walls that bound the grounds give it a somewhat shut-in, sombre appearance.

Be this as it may, no one ever yet thought of calling Stourton Hall a cheerful-looking place.

The house is old, without the merit of being ancient. Sir Stanley's grandfather built it—a man who seems to have had very gloomy and indistinct views of the powers of architecture.

Large and roomy, turret-staired, long-corridorred, and high-gabled, it certainly is, but the dark grey stone of which it is built has a look of incipient dampness, as though the whole house was thoroughly drenched at one time, and the sun has never since shone on it with power enough to dry it up again.

The place is all new to Alice ; she has only been there once before, and that was at a family dinner given soon after her engagement to the owner of the mansion. Now, Sir Stanley takes her over the whole place, from the large reception-rooms—chill and vast, and faded, to the servants' bed-rooms, in a detached building adjoining the house, and Alice's impression is that the whole place looks grim and dreary, and badly kept.

She misses the bright tints and fresh colours that light up the interior of Grey Towers, and looks round in vain for the elegant furniture, the warmth, the gilding, and the glow.

The same idea perhaps strikes Sir Stanley also, for he says, in a tone of apology,—

“ This house really wants putting in order a little ; I had no idea it was in such a neglected state all through. You know it has only been a single man's home for some time past now, and servants are so dreadfully careless. I sadly wanted a wife to take up the management, and rule here.”

Thus Alice is installed in her new sphere—thus the new life opens to her, and it must be confessed she looks round her with a sinking heart and bewildered brain, wondering how she is “ to take up the management and rule ” among all those formidable, staring, criticizing-looking servants, who have had it all their own way so long.





CHAPTER XXVI.

KATIE.

KATIE THWAITES is expected home by the noon-day train, and great excitement reigns in the curate's house on this particular day. Katie, the eldest sister, the pupil at Madame Denton's, the almost grown-up young lady of whom the boys have heard so much, and seen so little, is coming home at last to live with them.

A general stir of preparation reigns through the household ; Harry and Lenny, excused from their usual lessons, work industriously in the garden, "doing it up for Katie," they say. True, the "doing-up" only consists in picking up stray leaves—early withered ones, that have dropped off in summer's full prime—pulling up weeds, sweeping up rubbish, and making the paths tidy ; but they are doing their best, and it would be well for us if we all tried to do our *best* in our various ways.

The task is an all-important one to the boys ; it is their tribute of welcome to their absent sister.

Even the curate may be observed to be more excited than usual ; he finishes his sermon early, arranges his papers more compactly and methodically than usual on the study table ; he tidies his book-shelves, all with an unacknowledged view to Katie's approval ; and Gertrude, the minute breakfast is over, is gone to her daughter's room, to complete the finishing touches there.

Katie's room is not by any means a large one, but it is neat and bright, situated on the pleasantest side of the house, away from the rude noises of the busy street.

The youngest baby is on the floor, nibbling away at its ring ; Sarah, mounted on a step-ladder, is putting up some clean muslin curtains to the window—curtains she is rather proud of, as they are white as snow, and of her own getting up.

She is pausing every now and then to note the effect of her work, watch the baby, and address a word or two to her mistress, who is decking out and adorning the dressing-table with its needful furniture.

"You'll find Miss Katie a wonderful help to you, ma'am, I daresay."

"I hope so, Sarah ; it will be a great comfort to have her at home again with us."

"I suppose, ma'am, she'll take some of the district-visiting off your hands, and teach in the Sunday-school, and help make the children's clothes, and teach Master Harry and Lenny the piano ; she'll be a wonderful help at the sewing, I daresay. Young ladies learn sewing at boarding-schools, don't they, ma'am ?"

"Oh, yes ; they are taught to sew and darn stockings, but whether they are fond of such employments is another matter," replies Mrs. Thwaites, as she finishes putting on a clean pincushion-cover.

"Then I hope Miss Katie will be fond of it, ma'am, and I hope she'll take great notice of the children, so as to give you a little more rest sometimes."

Mrs. Thwaites turns towards Sarah with a smile.

"You have made up your mind Katie is not to lead an idle life here, Sarah ?"

"Yes, indeed, ma'am ; it won't do to be idle in this house, where there's so many constant calls on one's time. Miss Katie is not the young lady I take her to be, if she

won't lend a helping hand, and a clever and a willing one too."

Sarah considers herself quite privileged to give her opinion, for she nursed Katie in her days of babyhood, and has nursed every one of the other children since, at every spare minute she could give between her other duties. She has been an inmate of the curate's house ever since he married, and has worked there with a zeal few servants of the present day can emulate. She has borne her share in the burden of rearing a large family, and sympathizes deeply with her well-loved mistress when she seems weary, out of spirits, or hardly pressed with anxiety. So she looks on the coming Katie as one who is to take some of the burden off her mother's shoulders, and lay it on her own.

"The room looks very bright and cheerful now, Sarah."

"Yes, ma'am ; I really think it does, and I hope Miss Katie will always keep it as tidy as it is now. Shall I take the baby downstairs with me while I pick the peas for dinner?"

"Yes ; and I'll go out in the garden for her presently."

Gertrude brings in some carefully-selected books for her daughter's little green swinging bookcase ; while she is putting them in their places, a shadow passes over her brow.

For another disappointment has come into her lot—a disappointment, though, that she carefully keeps out of sight, and will hardly acknowledge even to herself.

Perhaps it is natural for one of Gertrude's nature—hopeful, sunny, imaginative, and fervent—to build what Leonard will persist in calling "airy castles," and she has again been doing so, and expecting what has not come to pass.

Judging from bygone kindness, she supposed Miss Hay would leave Katie some token of her affection, such as a small legacy to continue her education, and set her forward in life a little ; but news, lately arrived, shows that nothing of the sort has been done.

The poor lady, so suddenly called away, had no time to set her house in order at the last, and when her next-of-kin—a hungry, grasping, avaricious man—comes down from London to take possession of the few thousands he expects to gain, he finds she has sunk all her money in buying herself a life annuity.

In terrible rage at his disappointment, he gathers up all her savings, sells her furniture by public auction, and retires a mortified and angry man.

Her godmother has done all she could for Katie during her life-time ; she has kept her at an expensive school, and grudged neither extras nor outlays on her.

Very kind, very thoughtful this has been, and Gertrude is vexed and angry with herself for even having ventured to expect more.

By-and-by a hack cab from the railway station drives up to the door, and from it emerges the long-looked-for eldest sister.

Harry and Lenny draw back in a kind of respectful awe as a tall young lady, with lots of sunny brown, crimped hair, with a face as bright and blooming as a flower, and with a glad smile on her lip, comes running into the house in a kind of tumult.

“ Here you all are ! mamma and papa ! Harry and Lenny ! Oh, how rejoiced I am to see you all ! Where’s the new baby, and Maud and Lotty ? ”

But here sudden recollection comes to Katie, stopping her inquiries, and calming down her raptures.

Presently, with the two boys holding by her hands, they go into the study, where, for the next half-hour, a joyous scene of talking, laughing, questioning, answering, embracing, and delightful tumult goes on.

The boys have recovered their powers of speech, and have much to tell of what they have done, and learnt, and seen. Sister Katie is supposed to take an interest in everything, from Latin exercises to a game of football.

"Won't you give Katie time to take off her hat, boys? Dinner will be ready soon. Lenny, show your sister her room," Mrs. Thwaites says at last, as she takes Maud from Katie's arms.

Katie comes downstairs again shortly, smiling and fresh looking, with a spray of scarlet verbena Lenny has given her in the bosom of her white dress, and with a letter in her hand.

"O mamma, dear! Madame Denton gave me this for you."

"What is it, Katie? did madame tell you what it was about?" Gertrude asks, as with a strange prophetic sinking at her heart she puts the unopened letter into her pocket.

"No, mamma, she didn't say. Perhaps she has sent you her private opinion about me; but you mustn't mind all Madame Denton tells you. She had her own favourites, and I wasn't one of them."

"Hadn't you better open the letter, Gertrude?" suggests Mr. Thwaites, as he places Katie's chair near the table.

"Not now, Leonard, the news will keep till after dinner, Katie; sit down my dear, you must be hungry after your long journey."

Sarah has exerted her utmost skill in making that frugal meal a tempting one for her young lady. The very kind of batter pudding that was Katie's peculiar weakness when a child now figures prominently on the table, and Katie's eyes sparkle with pleasure when she sees her old tastes and likings remembered.

"Oh, how nice it is to be at home again! The very atmosphere seems better and purer here than that of the old closed-up dusty school-room," exclaims she.

However Katie may be altered in other respects, it is very evident she has brought back her own warm, loving nature, her own quick, impulsive, ardent feelings. Leonard feels thankful at heart the long absence has not weaned his child from her home ties and affections.

After dinner, when Katie is seated—like a queen in her court—surrounded by a group of admiring children, who crowd round her, all eager for a look and a word from the newly-arrived sister, Mrs. Thwaites walks slowly to the study, with the opened letter in her hand.

"This is just what I expected, Leonard !"

"What did you expect, Gerty? Nothing very cheerful, if one may judge from your very grave countenance."

"Madame Denton has sent her bill for Katie's last six months' schooling"

"I thought poor Miss Hay settled that?"

"She did up to Christmas last, and I'm sure she would have done so now, had not death called her away so suddenly. The debt falls on us now, Leonard."

"How much is it?"

"Including pieces of music and extras, the sum is forty-nine guineas," replies Gertrude, with a sigh.

"So much as that ! I had no idea our little one's education was so expensive."

"I don't suppose it is excessive for a modern school, but the large sum will fall very heavily on us. I don't know how it is to be paid at all out of an income of a hundred and twenty pounds a year," Gertrude says dolefully.

"It will indeed be a struggle. Don't you think, as a matter of conscience, the present heir ought to carry out his aunt's views?"

"As a matter of *conscience*, perhaps, but not as a legal one. Besides, we can never expect anything from James Hay. Report says he is terribly disappointed himself."

"What are we to do then, Gerty?" Leonard asks, as he glances thoughtfully over the bill. "This money must be paid."

"Yes, it must ; and I know not where to turn for help. There is no one in the wide world we could ask to advance the sum. Oh, Leonard ! it is a dreadful thing to be in debt ! Through all our struggles, and privations, and anxieties, we

have hitherto avoided *debt*, and now it is thrust on us suddenly and unexpectedly."

Gertrude turns to the window, apparently to watch a heavy cart rumble past ; but Leonard knows she is gone there in reality to hide her bitter tears.

The summer afternoon has closed in drearily after the bright sunny morning. A heavy shower is falling, the driver sits on his cart with a huge sack over his shoulders to keep out the rain-drops, and the wheels go on splashing through the mud.

"You have omitted one thing, Gerty," Leonard says, gently passing his arm round her waist, and drawing her tear-stained face towards him. "You have omitted to ask for guidance and wisdom from Him who alone can give strength, and who has never yet failed us."

A few quiet words from her husband, a short prayer offered from the heart, earnest and faith-given, calms Gertrude.

She wipes away her tears, and sits down more hopefully to talk the matter over.

"Perhaps it will be better to write at once to Madame Denton, tell her the whole of the circumstances, and offer to pay her by instalments, say, five pounds a quarter. It will take just two years and a half before the debt can be paid off. Still, if she is considerate, and inclined to meet our case with kindness, she may accept the offer as the best we can make. I am sure we could not pare our income closer than that."

"We have sometimes thought it was pared closely enough already, Gerty, and yet, off comes another rind," Leonard says cheerily. "Yes, I think your plan is a reasonable one. I promise to curtail all my extras, and will neither expect a new coat nor a new book till I see 'settled in full' written on that scrap of paper."

Gertrude's eyes fill again.

"Now cheer up, my love ! We have much to be thank-

ful for. How kind and generous Miss Hay was during all these past years, to portion out so large a share of her income for our child! I only wish she could have been spared to see the good fruit of her unselfishness; for I hope there will be much and bright fruit yet in our daughter's future life. Katie is not spoiled, I think."

Leonard pauses, for a burst of silvery laughter, clear and ringing as a bell, followed by a chorus of childish trebles, merry exclamations, and joyous gushes of mirth, come pealing in from the dining-room. He listens to the sounds, with a smile on his lip.

"How happy they all are together! Shall you tell Katie about this bill of Madame Denton's?"

"No, Leonard! I would not for anything cast a gloom over her bright young life just on her return home amongst us. We will keep our trouble to ourselves. The making up of five pounds out of every quarter's income will indeed be a *trouble*, particularly as we have no savings to fall back on."

"Very trying to you, poor wife! My long illness, poor Lotty's funeral, and the high price of provisions last winter, swallowed up our little 'nest egg.' But we must not murmur; these misfortunes were all beyond our control."

"I don't murmur, Leonard! but it is hard to bear the privations poverty brings in its train; I often feel it a worry to have to make every penny stretch to its utmost limits, it seems to cramp one's very nature. Do you know I often long to do generous things to poor people in this parish, and it vexes me sometimes to think we have no greater means of relieving the misery there is round us? Can you imagine anything more trying than that is, Leonard?"

"Yes, Gerty. It's far more trying to have the means, and not the heart to be generous. I call that a *far* more pitiable case.

The gloom has quite gone from Gertrude's face as she

meets her children at the tea-table that afternoon. She has written the letter to Madame Denton, and posted it, and now she tries to banish the very recollection of the debt from her mind, at least till the answer to her letter comes.

She listens to Lenny's account of the funny stories Katie has been telling; wonderful stories! full of adventures and strange things the children had never even heard of before, and she talks cheerfully with her bright pretty daughter, whose smiles and gaiety seem infectious.

After tea Katie sits at the piano, and the well-worn instrument gives forth sounds it had never seemed capable of before—never did any of them imagine it possessed such a wealth of harmony as Katie evokes from it.

She plays Mendelssohn's "*Leider ohne Worte*," and Beethoven's "*Sonata Pathétique*,"—music "*andante*" and "*agitato*" floats by turns through the room, and wakes up echoes long silent in the old house.

Sarah softly closes the nursery door, that the sleeping children may not be disturbed, and comes and sits on the stairs outside the dining-room door to listen. She says afterwards,—

"Her own mistress does play well, fine church tunes, and good homely music. But no, never in her whole life did she hear such playing as Miss Katie's, it was like a whole band of music. There were trills, and shakes, and runs, and loud parts, and soft parts. It was a perfect treat to listen—so it was."

Katie certainly shows unmistakable proofs of careful training in music, superadded to by an innate sparkling genius of her own. Her voice is fine also, and gives token of what it will be by-and-by. All are impressed by the pure tones as its notes swell forth in an air from the Oratorio of Elijah, "*Woe unto them which despise Him*." There is so much taste in her singing that the listeners are ready to believe there must be true, heart-impressed feeling in it also.

Leonard has been lured from his study this evening to listen to his daughter's performance. He leans back on the sofa, thoroughly enjoying the sweet sounds, as Katie dashes on from gay to grave, from light, pretty airs, to solemn-sounding, grander harmonies, and marvellous in-action for him ! For one whole evening he neither handles a pen nor turns over a single page in his books.

By-and-by, when the piano is finally closed, and Katie comes over and sits beside him, he still lingers, talking pleasantly with her, and trying in his own way to sound the depths of his daughter's nature.

He longs to find out whether that sunny fascination springs from a glad, true heart, or whether it is merely superficial, a shallow surface-growth without real depth of good soil.

He feels the disadvantage of the long separation acutely. Many budding twigs and straggling sprays have sprung forth from the young plant since his hand trained it last. Leonard prays and hopes the fair seeming may not prove after all to be "nothing but leaves."

In music Katie may be called "advanced," and her father allows her due credit for that ; but when by-and-by she talks of having "nearly finished her education," she sees a quiet smile pass over his face.

"Now why are you smiling, papa ?"

"I was only thinking, Katie, how much you are ahead of me. I have never once imagined my education is '*nearly finished*' yet."

"What do you mean, papa ? Surely you must be only joking ! Everybody can see how much you know, and how clever you are."

"And I can see better than anybody else can of how much I am still ignorant. There are heights and depths in almost every subject I could name, that I have never yet fathomed. Take any branch of science, for instance, do you think I am perfect in all its details ? And even if I was perfect to-day, there are discoveries and changes going

on that keep a man ever learning, if he wishes to keep pace with the times."

"Oh, yes! Of course you are right if you look at things in that light."

"In what other light can I look at them, Katie? Why it takes a lifetime to study astronomy, for instance—and how little do we really know in the end! And it takes a lifetime to study the Bible, and who in the wide world has ever been able to say he has discovered the whole of the true riches and value of that unfathomable mine of wealth? No, Katie, my education is not finished, and I never expect it to be till death comes to bring me wider, and fuller, and grander knowledge. Now I know in part, but *then* shall I know even as also I am known."

Mr. Thwaites is forced to confess to himself, when the evening is over, that he cannot quite come to a decision about Katie. It will take more than a few hours' study to understand her character thoroughly.

In due course the answer from Madame Denton comes, and it proves far more favourable than Mrs. Thwaites expected, thus proving that when we really give our full confidence and tell out the truth bravely, our frankness wins an equal frankness in return. Madame Denton states at once the terms on which she will meet Gertrude's necessities.

She is willing to accept payment at the rate of five pounds a quarter, as Gertrude suggests, and she also reduces the net sum to forty-five pounds, instead of the forty-nine guineas first named.

"Very generous of Madame Denton, I'm sure!—more than we could expect from her. You see, Gerty, the way grows smoother already. You must have good courage for the rest," Leonard says, as he reads over madame's letter.

"Good courage for the pinching, and the scraping, and the saving! You know, Leonard, I shouldn't mind it one bit for myself, but I so fear the privations will fall heavily on those who are so precious to me."

However, Mrs. Thwaites is not going to repine now. She will strive to do her best. Her course of action grows clearer, though many hardships assail her at the very first outset.

It is not easy to wrench the five pounds a quarter from what before hardly seemed enough for bare necessities—and — there is another mouth to fill ! another to feed and clothe now !

Mrs. Thwaites acknowledges it is dreadful to have to think of such a petty, paltry, miserable consideration when she looks at her sunny, lively, careless Katie, whom she would fain surround with every needed comfort, and shield from even the shadow of cold, stern poverty.

And Katie Thwaites, all unknowing of the bitter, ceaseless struggle, flits about the house like a joyous young butterfly. Now, her voice is heard, clear as a lark's, at the piano ; again, she is laughing and romping with the boys in the garden.

All the books in the study have been looked over, some of them pronounced "dull and slow," others have been lightly skimmed through ; and others, such as poetry, biography, and fiction, devoured to the last letter.

"Missie don't help very much, after all ! And she don't make up her bed, or keep her room very tidy. It takes me fully half-an-hour from my other work, every day, picking up her things and putting them together," says patient, much-enduring Sarah to herself ; but she does not speak her blame aloud. Not one in the house has the slightest wish to proclaim there is any flaw in the brilliant "eldest daughter," who has so completely taken their hearts by storm, and won them to herself.



CHAPTER XXVII.

A MORNING VISITOR.

KATIE has not been very long from school before Richard Gurling comes to make a formal morning call. He has been away for a month or more staying with some friends in Scotland, and on his return is not a little surprised to find such a blooming young lady in his senior's house.

He has often and often heard of Katie as a school-girl, and probably expects to see some over-grown hoyden, awkward and shy, with short hair, and shorter dress—some retiring young creature well up in dates, and verbs perhaps, but with not an idea beyond her school-books and sums.

To tell the truth, Mr. Gurling's ideas on the subject are altogether misty and shadowy. He has no sisters of his own, and has never been thrown much in the way of "sweet girl-graduates," or of young lady pupils of any kind.

But Richard deserves a word for himself. A thoughtful, active, earnest man he has proved to be. Mr. Thwaites finds him very capable both in pulpit and parish. Between him and Leonard a cordial friendship already exists; both are thoroughly unselfish; both are of the same tastes in the noblest and highest pursuits. If Mr. Thwaites helps Richard with the experience of his more advanced mind, his instruction is well repaid by the warm gratitude of his junior.

The first morning after Mr. Gurling arrives home, he is quite startled when Mr. Thwaites introduces the tall, elegant-looking girl, hanging fondly on his arm, as "my daughter," and as he joins them—and they all three ramble down the lane together—he is still more surprised to find the "school-girl" is not in the least timid, but is able to talk—give her opinion—ay, and contradict also.

The result of all this is, that the next day he calls in due form on the new arrival.

Katie, in her usual thick white dress—with her hat thrown down on the table before her, has just been pressed into Lenny's service, to paint some sketches for a scrap-book he is making, and which is now the first object of his thoughts.

A spirited caricature or two, and a little water-colour landscape, just finished, shows Katie's imagination is as versatile as her musical talent. Lenny looks on eagerly, hardly able to control his delight—just then the dining-room door is thrown open, and Mr. Gurling, his hat in his hand, is announced.

"Run and tell mamma," Katie says to disappointed Lenny ; then, gathering her papers together in a heap, she sets herself to entertain the visitor. She has not much difficulty, it appears, in finding subjects for conversation—for when Mrs. Thwaites comes into the room a few minutes after, she finds a lively discussion going on ; Katie, animated and sparkling, her cheeks slightly flushed, an expression of arch merriment on her lip.

"I'm afraid your daughter will find Eastown very dull," Richard says, presently.

"Indeed ! I hope not, she has hardly had time to judge, I think ; you do not find yourself very miserable at home, do you, Katie ?"

"Oh, no, dear mamma ! I feel like one emancipated from thralldom ; the very feeling of being at home, and of being allowed to run into any room I like, is perfect bliss to me. The enjoyment is novel enough to last for many a day yet."

"I'm glad of that," and Mrs. Thwaites smiles at her animation. "Still, as I was just saying, I dare say I shall look for more variety before long, and I was asking Mr. Gurling what there is to be had here in the way of amusement."

"And I was just telling Mrs. Thwaites there is very little of that sort of thing in this place."

"Then, Mr. Gurling, I hope you will try and introduce some into the parish. Couldn't you get up some archery meetings, or croquet parties, or a 'thé dansante,' or a 'warr-dance,' or something?"

"Oh! all that would be quite out of my line, Miss Thwaites. It seems a pity there are not more young people here with whom you could associate."

"It is a pity, isn't it? You know I could never mix up with Hodge, and Hodge's wife and daughters, much as I love society." Katie rattles on, then she adds,—

"By-the-by, I noticed some nice people in church last Sunday afternoon. A tall, very handsome young man, and a lady with a sweet face, but oh! so sad and spiritless looking. Who were they, mamma, did you see them?"

Mrs. Thwaites turns inquiringly to Mr. Gurling,—

"Who does Katie mean?"

"I conclude your daughter alludes to Lady West, who walked over to church on Sunday afternoon. The first time she has been there since her return from London. Her brother, Philip Burges, was with her, and perhaps *some* ladies would term even Philip handsome."

There is a "soupon" of satire in mild Mr. Gurling's voice as he speaks thus of Philip.

For he is no favourite of his. His idle, aimless ways, his foolish extravagance is well-known to him, and he will not endorse Katie's warmly-spoken epithet. Perhaps he would rather have echoed Sarah's very homely proverb, "handsome is as handsome does."

Katie does not even notice Mr. Gurling's remark, she is already eagerly urging her mother.

"Oh ! dear mamma, do take me to see that lovely young bride, I'm sure I shall like her *so* much."

"I dare say we shall call at Stourton Hall before long, Katie."

"I noticed another of your congregation, Mr. Gurling. Do you know the builder, Mr. Wilford? He positively looks as if he'd been spell-bound in that very spot near the pillar, ever since I was last at Eastown church, years ago ! He wears the very same wig, and has the same solemn expression in his countenance—oh ! did you notice his singing?"

"I can't say I did particularly last Sunday, but Mr. Wilford is always earnest in whatever he does," replies Mr. Gurling, who seems considerably puzzled with the "school-girl."

"I wish you *had* noticed him," continues Katie, laughing merrily. "He was 'giving out' to the full extent of his voice in a cracked treble, and there came a high note in the tune, quite out of his compass. I was wondering how he would 'take it' when he growled out a deep bass note, so unexpectedly, that I quite started. Why doesn't somebody teach him singing, I wonder?"

"I remember the tune to which you allude, Miss Thwaites," says Mr. Gurling, somewhat formally. Then he turns to her mother,—

"We were singing one of James Montgomery's hymns."

"I don't think many hymns equal his," replies Mrs. Thwaites.

"I quite agree with you. Had I power to catch the tone and tune of any other man's mind, and blend it with my own, that Scottish minister's son should be my choice."

"And a very good choice too. Few can equal James Montgomery in deep feeling and genuine unsectarian piety. I wish we could all catch a little more of the tone of his mind," replies Mrs. Thwaites.

Katie, finding the conversation taken out of her hands, subsides into sudden silence.

Mr. Gurling rises soon after. "Shall I find Mr. Thwaites in the study?"

"I think so. He has not gone out into the parish yet."

When the door is shut Mrs. Thwaites looks at her daughter,—

"Katie, my dear! you must beware—"

"Now I'm in for a lecture for flirting with the curate," muses Katie, with quick school-girl's thought, and she turns to ask, with a slight blush on her cheek,—

"Beware of what, mamma?"

"Beware of trying to be smart at the expense of good taste and good feeling. Never, my dear child, turn any one's worship of God into ridicule! Praise, given from the heart, however untrained and weak it may be, is more acceptable to Him than the most perfect melody could be if it only came from the lip."

"Surely, mamma, you would not call such odious singing as Jacob Wilford's 'praise'?"

Mrs. Thwaites replies gravely, as she detects a smile of ridicule still lingering on Katie's lips,—

"Our best service must be only poor, tuneless, and weak in God's ears, yet He never turns away from those who give Him the earnest devotion of a trusting heart. Jacob Wilford is a worthy, humble-minded man, and gives his best, Katie. Never talk slightly of anything sacred, my child! I would not on any account have my daughter mount, even in jest, the dangerous 'seat of the scornful.'"

"Oh, mamma dear! you take too serious a view of my foolish remark. I only talked on so to astonish Mr. Gurling."

"Why did you want to astonish him, Katie?"

"Because he gazed at me in such a scrutinizing way through his goggles, like a benevolent owl peering through an ivy bush. He evidently considers me a creature of some unknown species, and has not made up his mind whether I'm tame or wild."

Mrs. Thwaites takes Mr. Gurling's part then, and says quietly,—

"Mr. Gurling is never the one to ridicule any person. He would never make the slightest remark that could savour of irreverence, or that might hurt any one's feelings. He has excellent musical taste himself, but I'm quite certain he never laughs at those who have not."

Katie gives an invisible shrug of her shoulders, then sets herself to finish the sketch she is doing for Lenny.

When the boy comes back to the room to examine it, he finds Katie has placed an extraordinary-looking owl on the top of a ruined tower, with a pair of gigantic spectacles dexterously poised on its beak.

"Oh, Katie! what a funny bird; and I declare it puts me a little in mind of, of—"

"Puts you in mind of what?" asks his sister, laughing merrily.

"Why it looks a little like Mr. Gurling, doesn't it, Harry?"

Phlegmatic Harry comes over, and gazes at it scornfully.

"How can a bird be like a man, stupid?"

Mrs. Thwaites takes the paper in her hand, despite Katie's laughing endeavours; and there the likeness is, cleverly done and unmistakable.

"Oh, Katie, Katie!"

"Don't be angry with me, dear mamma; it was only a passing fancy that I could not resist, not meant in the least for disrespect. But I wish he wouldn't look at me as though I was a mere overgrown baby. Now, Lenny, I'll paint you a better picture than that. Imagine the owl has flapped his wings and flown away," adds Katie, as she tears up the offending sketch in a dozen pieces.

Time passes on. The pleasant summer days speed rapidly over. Autumn—with its russet and scarlet, its faded and rustling leaves, with its colder days and keener winds—comes on.

Katie sometimes grows impatient at the dull, prosaic routine of daily life in her father's house.

She longs for more excitement, for a wider circle of acquaintance, for more visiting, and for at least a few pleasant parties.

All the books in the house have been examined, she tires a little of playing with the children, her mind goes hither and thither, seeking for some interest to fill up the intense yearning for action that, though she knows it not, is a strong element in her nature.

The ceaseless monotony of the home-life wearies her. "Anything rather than this tameness," thinks she. No uncommon feeling, this. It attacks most of us ere we have found out the real duties of life; ere we "fit in," as it were, into the distinct groove Providence has prepared for our special occupation.

Mr. Thwaites sees this restlessness of his daughter, and thinks he understands the cause. Her keen, clever mind, like a rich, luxurious soil that has not been well planted, is sending forth an unhealthy growth of "leaves," only "leaves"; and he longs to see the right seed cast there, knowing God can, in His own good time, give the "increase."

So he proposes daily readings with her, the subject to be one of which she seems most forgetful and sadly ignorant—namely, the teachings of the Bible.

Katie gladly agrees to this because her father wishes it, and gradually the subject becomes one of intense interest to her; she feels it is the grandest, deepest, the most sublime she has ever entered on.

She likes to ask her father questions, and hear his opinion; she can grasp all he tells her in theory, but not yet has she learned the deeper lessons that reading is designed to give. Her father watches, and waits, and prays the Holy Spirit will ere long come to her with His guidance and light.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

ALICE AND KATIE.

MR. and Mrs. Thwaites take their daughter with them when they call at Stourton Hall, and Alice, sitting all alone in her great drawing-room—looking cold, isolated, and nervous—tries to entertain them graciously.

But there is an evident restraint in her manner, as though she is not quite her own mistress, and hardly knows how far to extend her welcomes.

"Stanley is somewhere in the grounds, I believe. He was here only a few minutes ago. Shall I send out, and try to find him?"

"Oh, pray don't disturb him!" exclaims Leonard, who strongly suspects his being out of the way just then may not be altogether accidental.

"We have not long to stay, for we are going back to Eastown by the road," adds Gertrude. "I hope your friends at Grey Towers are well?"

"Quite well, thank you; but I'm sorry to say I seldom see them now."

"Indeed! I should have fancied the stroll over there through the fields would have been very pleasant."

"Oh, yes, very nice! But it is not a question of distance that prevents my seeing my friends. Philip still comes here sometimes."

Lady West speaks with some hesitation, and then Mrs. Thwaites all at once recollects a report she has heard—that Sir Stanley West is not on good terms with his father-in-law, and that they never exchange visits now.

She regrets she has introduced the subject, and hastens to bring up some other topic that will not awaken such painful feelings.

She feels sorry for Alice in her loneliness ; lonely, in spite of her large establishment, her grand house, and her title.

The Baronet quarrelled with Squire Burges almost as soon as he came back from his wedding trip, and the quarrel had been about money.

Tom promised to pay down five thousand pounds as his daughter's wedding portion. It may not seem much for the owner of Grey Towers to give ; but still, when a man lives up to, ay, and above his income, it is not so easy to pay out a large sum of capital at once.

The squire urged a short delay, and Sir Stanley, who had already promised the money elsewhere, to pay off some long out-standing debts of his own, was furious at having to wait.

He spoke of the squire in a manner that annoyed Alice extremely.

"You don't seem to remember I am his daughter, Stanley."

"Most unfortunately I do, though I would fain banish the recollection if possible. Remember, I can't have you perpetually going to Grey Towers. You are my wife now, and your place is in your own house."

"I have only been there twice since we returned from London," falters she, amazed at her courage in arguing the point with him.

"Twice too often ! Had I known business matters were to remain so long in abeyance you should not have gone there at all."

Thus Mrs. Burges is after all defeated in the dearest

wish of her heart. What advantage is it having a daughter married to a baronet if she cannot show that daughter about, make up entertainments for her, and introduce her as "my daughter Alice, now Lady West?"

The peach is robbed of its bloom; the gem has lost its brightness to her, and she frets and fumes because intercourse between the two houses is stopped.

Philip is the only one who breaks through the rule. He still comes and goes, and is a kind of telegraph institution between the two families. Sir Stanley has never quarrelled with him nor forbade his visiting there; so he strolls in frequently in his careless, off-handed way, and Alice is glad to welcome him.

Lady West would fain have her husband with her when she returns her wedding calls, but hitherto he has always made some excuse; he is too busy or disinclined to take the trouble.

"Why can't you make your visits alone, Alice? I hate morning calls."

"Oh, Stanley! that will look so strange; people will quite expect to see you for the first time."

"What matter about people's expectations? First and last visits are alike to me."

"But they will talk so; we can't altogether disregard appearances."

"Let them talk, Alice. Indeed, I think it will be rather a charity on our part to give the good people of Eastown a subject for gossip. However, as you make a point of the matter, I'll order the carriage and we'll go at once."

Thus at last they set out together one day late in autumn—a cold, rough day, that brings the promise of winter even before its time. The north wind blows showers of dead leaves into Alice's lap as they drive through parks and lanes. She shivers as she draws her tiger-skin rug closer round her.

But colder far than the weather is her husband's manner,

as he sits wrapped up in his most morose mantle of taciturnity. He is silent or abrupt according to his mood in the various houses to which they are admitted, comporting himself very much like a victim who finds himself pressed into service sorely against his will.

"Are there any more places at which you want to call, Alice? Don't mind me, now I'm out I'd just as soon stop at a dozen or two more houses."

"The Thwaites called on us some time ago. Will you go there, Stanley?"

"Drive to Mr. Thwaites," shouts he to the footman; then he adds in a lower tone, "I wonder whether that 'prig of a parson' will be at home, and what he will think of my calling at his house."

The "parson" is at home, and so are all his family. They have gathered in the study; the bright rays of a cheerful fire lights up the place in the autumn twilight, and makes the little circle round the blaze a very cozy, cheerful-looking one.

The glow of the warm room falls pleasantly on the new arrivals as Sarah throws open the door and announces them.

Leonard makes space for the guests, without breaking up the group, and sending Harry and Lenny away.

After the first greetings are over, Sir Stanley looks round.

"Upon my word, this is an infinitely pleasanter scene than that we have just left; it is far better being here than dragging through lanes and roads half the day behind a pair of lazy horses."

"I shouldn't think your horses are lazy," Leonard says.

"The carriage ones are; Alice doesn't give them half enough practice, and I never drive when I can ride."

"I'm sure riding is far livelier than driving. Don't you think so, Lady West?"

It is Katie who speaks. Sir Stanley turns round quickly at the sound of her fresh young voice, and his eyes rest smilingly on the fair young face.

"Are you fond of riding, Miss Thwaites?"

"I have never had any practice yet, but I'm sure I should delight in it. Instinct tells me I should."

"I've no doubt you would make a capital horsewoman. Now do come over to Stourton Hall and ride with my wife sometimes. It might encourage her to go out a little more. I'll find you a mount and give you a few lessons to begin with."

"I shall be very glad of Miss Thwaites' company at Stourton Hall as often as she pleases; but I don't think even the pleasure of her companionship will make me ride frequently," Lady West says, a little coldly. And here Gertrude interposes at once.

"I can't promise to let Alice accept your invitation to ride, Sir Stanley. She knows little about horses now except from theory: and as there seems no opportunity for much experience in that way, she must give up the thought at present."

It pleases Sir Stanley to fling off his reserve, and make himself most conversable during this visit. The curate's genial manner in his own house is so different to that of the stern reprover the baronet once found he could be. Gertrude's motherly wisdom, Katie's bright eyes and merry badinage, make the half-hour pass so quickly and pleasantly that he finds fault with his wife for coming away so soon.

"Why did you rise so quickly, Alice? I was just beginning to enjoy myself."

"We stayed twice as long there as we did at any other place. I had no idea you wished to remain."

"You never exercise much discernment. It was quite a surprise to me to find the parson's house could be so lively and home-like. That Katie Thwaites is a fine girl. Her features are a little like yours, but she is—"

He pauses suddenly, and his wife inquires—

"What is she? You haven't finished your sentence."

"Well, she is more like you *were* when I first saw you."

"That is little more than a year ago ; I can't have changed very much since then."

"Oh ! I don't insinuate you have fallen off. I should be the last in the world to venture to announce so mortifying a fact to any lady, least of all to my wife. I must add, however, Miss Thwaites must be like a ray of sunshine in a house. What an animated girl she is ! Such earnestness, expression, and spirit. She will make a splendid woman by-and-by. A rare, sweet, companionable woman. Just the one to bring forth, encourage, and develope all the latent good there is in one's nature."

Sir Stanley's praise falls somewhat unpleasantly on Alice's ears. She thinks a spirit of reproach breathes through it, and *that* pains her. He has drawn Katie's character as exactly the opposite of her own, for she knows she fails utterly in the qualities he attributes to Miss Thwaites. She shrinks further back in the corner of her carriage, and wonders how much of her husband's speech she must take as meant *at* her.

Has he also been disappointed in his married life ? Did he expect liveliness and companionship from her ?

If so, he must often seek it in vain, for she is well aware of having settled down into a tame, apathetic, normal state of dullness, and she is apt to blame her unsympathetic lot for that.

Long dismal days are often hers—when her husband is out with his horses and dogs—long, silent evenings also—when after his hearty dinner—for he loves good living—he doses soundly in his chair.

Would all this be different if she was bright, sprightly, sparkling, and clever like Katie Thwaites is ?

Lady West is still pondering these questions over, when the carriage stops at their own door. She goes wearily upstairs to dress for dinner, with the prospect of another

dull, taciturn *tête-à-tête* meal before her, that will merge, by-and-by, into another long, dreary, unsociable evening.

For conversation does not flow on easily between this married pair ; there is no flash of wit, no burst of confidence, no cheerful repartee, no thoughtful communion or earnest outpouring of deep, true feeling.

There is nothing in their daily intercourse to raise their minds above the poor, perishable things of this world, or to point them to brighter and purer hopes above.

The magic charm of affection, that makes the very presence of its object a joy and delight, is sadly wanting. They each feel this is the case, but neither of them can yet find the remedy.

Alice does not interfere much in household matters. She tried to do so at first, but Mrs. Rundle, the pompous housekeeper, and herself were constantly coming to a "passage of arms."

When Lady West gave orders not exactly as the housekeeper approved, she was driven into silence by the crushing rebuke, "My late mistress never had it so, your ladyship."

A speech that makes the present mistress subside at once. So Mrs. Rundle has it all her own way, and "feathers her nest," as housekeepers occasionally will.

Sir Stanley would have been wiser had he sent away this woman before he brought Alice home—but he never thought it necessary to do so, nor is he aware now how oppressive she is, nor how she defies his wife's authority. Alice does not complain, she only grows more timid, and finally ceases to interfere at all.

Lady West rarely touches the piano either. Her husband professes to be a judge of music, and declares he can see no merit in any performance that is not of the highest order, and Alice is sadly conscious her playing cannot in any degree reach that standard. Once she remembers hearing Sir Stanley doubt whether she could even be said to be "musical."

So in the long evenings, when they are alone together, she dawdles over handsome pieces of fancy-work, wondering what subject she shall talk about next, and while she stitches away, he is silent, morose, or contradictory, according to the mood he is in.

A sad picture of domestic life ! yet similar scenes are met with, alas ! in other homes than Stourton Hall.





CHAPTER XXIX.

KATIE'S RESOLVE.

ERTRUDE pays off the first instalment of Madame Denton's bill with comparative ease. True, every household outlay has been curtailed as much as possible to meet the demand; but in the pleasant summer weather, when the children can live half the day out of doors, expenses do not seem so great, nor so numerous.

It is not so very difficult to lay out the family dinner table when a plentiful supply of fruit and vegetables supplement the repast. Since Mr. Richard Gurling has taken up his abode in his uncle's rectory, neither of these useful commodities have been lacking in the curate's house.

Twice a week regularly, Ned Hartley, who assists in garden work at the rectory, is seen limping up to Mr. Thwaites' back door with a large basket in his hand, the contents of which have been selected under Mr. Gurling's own supervision.

Not the worst productions of the garden in that basket one may be pretty sure if that is the case, and Sarah's heart is made glad at having so many fresh vegetables at her hand, and such ready supplies of fruit for her puddings and jam.

But when summer is over, when the autumn stores have been gathered in, when the garden lies bleak and barren, and while snowdrifts are piled in frozen heaps over the beds, then Mrs. Thwaites finds her difficulties increase tenfold.

Warm fires are needed in the rooms, and warmer clothes must be had for the children. In vain Sarah helps her to mend and stitch and piece the old garments ; in vain are they altered, reduced, or enlarged as the case requires ; there are still many deficiencies and shortcomings that the two faithful women lament together.

Sarah's knitting-pins are in motion every spare minute, from morning to night, and every possible luxury—or what *seems* luxury—is banished. But still Gertrude finds it terribly hard work to scrape together five pounds out of the current expenses.

In the very midst of this hard trying, Mrs. Thwaites is smitten down with severe illness. She keeps up among her household as much as possible, hiding her pain, and hoping each day will bring relief ; but at last, vanquished in the conflict with disease, she lays down her work and creeps wearily up to her bed.

Intense and dire is the consternation in the household, when the active mistress and tender mother is laid aside. No one really seems to realize how positively necessary she is in every department of the “menage” till her kindly help is withdrawn, till her ready hand ceases to minister to their wants, and till her cheerful voice no longer sounds among them.

The attack is a dangerous one. Then comes the anxiety and suspense—the expense of the doctor's visits, and the need of the numberless extras required in a sick-room.

Gertrude knows all this, and the thought troubles her as she lies sick and helpless on the pillow. Not for worlds would she repine at her affliction, for she knows well whose Hand has sent it ; and she knows she ought to trust Him for the rest.

But her weakened mind dwells on the extra burden thus laid on the already-straitened household ; she muses on it more than is good for her.

Katie proves singularly useless just at this crisis. She

does not seem in the least to comprehend how her mother's duties ought in some degree to be taken up by her. This ignorance does not spring from selfishness, but from an utter want of thought—and alas ! the results of both are in many cases pretty much the same.

She romps and plays with the children when she feels inclined for a game with them. She reads with her father in the study during the portioned hour after dinner. By-and-by she bends entranced over some choice volume of biography or travel, forgetful of everything else ; then she sits by the fire with her hands folded idly on her lap, her eyes full of dreaminess, as she conjures up to her imagination glowing scenes, very unlike the surroundings and incidents of her daily life. In the twilight, she will creep up to her mother's room, and sit there while the invalid sleeps wearily, or tosses about in feverish restlessness on the pillow.

"Very little use in sickness is Miss Katie," thinks overburdened Sarah to herself at this time. "Very little good does she do in the house, after all. All the fine music and painting, and accomplishments as they calls them, ain't much service in hours of trial and trouble. For my part I'd far rather have the learning that teaches how to use the hands in being helpful, and the eyes in seeing what's wanted to be done."

One morning Katie is down very late for breakfast. Mr. Thwaites has waited and waited for her, and at last, greatly against his will, has been compelled to finish morning prayers, to take his coffee and go out, without having had a glimpse of his eldest daughter.

She comes downstairs at last, a little vexed to find she has overslept herself, and rather angry to see the breakfast is over, and that Sarah is clearing away the things.

"Oh ! Sarah, I'm late to-day again," exclaims she, taking hold of the coffee-pot and pouring some of its contents into her cup.

"That ain't anything new, is it, miss?"

"I'm sure I didn't mean to sleep so long. How thick the coffee is this morning! I don't think it's well made."

"Your papa don't profess to be an experienced cook, miss."

"I suppose not. Whatever do you mean by saying that, Sarah?"

"Because the master made the coffee this morning."

"Why in the world did papa make it?"

"Only because the mistress is ill in bed, and I had to be with her just at breakfast-time, and only because his grown-up daughter was fast asleep in bed after eight o'clock this morning."

There is a cutting irony in Sarah's tone that only long service in the household gives her courage to use, but she does feel out of patience with her "young lady" whom she nursed as an infant, and she must speak out her mind once for all.

Katie's cheeks flush brightly. She notices the tone and the reproof.

"You should have called me, Sarah."

"I did call you, miss, both before and after I'd dressed the children. There's two of them in mistress's room now fussing, and romping, and noising, and making far more racket than is good for your poor dear mamma's head. She'll never get well, if she isn't kept easier both in mind and body; and now, Miss Katie, I've given you my true and candid opinion, so don't please be offended with me."

Sarah lifts the tray with the scattered remains of the breakfast, and turns to go out of the room, but Katie springs before her, closes the door, and in her quick, impulsive manner exclaims,—

"Tell me the whole truth at once, Sarah. Don't you think mamma is getting better?"

Sarah puts down the tray, and says solemnly,—

"Since you ask me in earnest like that, miss, I must

confess I don't think her at all better, and the doctor doesn't think so either. He is very anxious about her, and says she must be kept quiet. But there, she worries and frets, and thinks, and puzzles so, that I don't know what the end will be."

"What can mamma worry and fret about, I wonder?" muses Katie, during the whole of that day. But there is no opportunity of getting the question answered. Her father is much in the sick-room, for he is anxious, very anxious, and watches the patient with scarcely concealed concern. Katie will not venture to try and find out what she wishes, till she has a good long opportunity of being with her mamma alone.

So in the twilight, as usual, she goes up to the quiet room, feeling secure, there she will not be disturbed till tea-time.

There is no candle lighted, but flickering flashes from the wood fire fall on the white counterpane, and on her mother's pale face, as it rests quietly on the pillow.

Katie, seated by the fireside, casts furtive glances at that face, and at last discovers, though Mrs. Thwaites does not speak or notice her, she is wide awake, and that tears are slowly welling from her closed eyes.

In a moment she is over at the bedside, kneeling there—bending over her mother fondly, and imploring her to tell what causes those silent tears.

"I dare say some of them are due to my bodily weakness, Katie, for I don't seem now to be able to bear things as I used. And yet I never ought to distrust the kind, tender hand of my God who has led me hitherto—Oh! He is able to bring me through all these troubles and anxieties, and He *will*, if I have only more faith in Him, and trust Him more."

"But what troubles and anxieties do you mean, dear mamma? Sarah darkly hinted at some trials you have met with. Do tell me what it is all about?"

"It frets me dreadfully, Katie, that I have failed in my



Katie by the bedside of her mother.—Page 190.

promise to Madame Denton this quarter. This illness of mine makes it utterly impossible for me to keep it now."

"What promise is it?" questions Katie eagerly.

Then Gertrude remembers her daughter is blindly ignorant of all the circumstances of that terrible debt. She has thought it best never to cloud her young life by telling her; even now she makes a faint attempt to put her off without explanation, but Katie is not the one to be satisfied with half answers.

Before long she has learned the whole history—learned it while she was still at the bedside—her mother's hand in hers—her brow puckered, her lips compressed with thought.

"You should have told me all this before, mamma."

"Why, my dear child? I wished to spare you from any share of my anxiety. Besides, what good would telling you be?"

"Much good every way. Do you think I could have borne to see you worried with debts brought on indirectly through myself, and not have done my utmost to help in paying them off? Oh! dear mamma, I wish you had trusted me more! What a useless, idle, unfeeling girl you must think me!" and Katie's voice breaks down utterly.

She goes over to the fireplace, piles on some more sticks and pokes the sparks about in her anxiety to hide the sudden gush of passionate tears that have risen to her eyes.

Not often does Katie weep, but when her tears come, they burst forth with a force that will not be resisted. For a brief space her very frame shakes with the flood of bitterness that sweeps over her.

Who knows what the awakening has been to the poor child? Who knows what bright dreams of imagination have to be thrust aside, and new views of life substituted instead?

At Madame Denton's school everybody knew Katie was in a manner adopted by Miss Hay, and that a most liberal allowance was made for her education; and a legend had

gone forth there, that by-and-by she was to be Miss Hay's heiress.

The words, insinuations, and flatteries of her companions had naturally enough induced Katie to picture out a glowing future for herself, that would somehow be realized one day.

But the reaction of this awakening is complete. Katie understands now more of the life that has really opened to her than she ever did before.

Now she can comprehend the meaning of all the savings, and thrifts, and strivings, and economies that have ever seemed so mean and pitiful to her. And she can read her mother's character in a light brighter and holier than ever.

After what seems a long time to Katie—for she has thought so much, and felt so much in the interval—she goes back to the bedside, with heavy eyelids, and cheeks still burning. She seats herself on a low chair, a little in the shade, and says softly,—

“Mamma, dear, I have thought of a plan for paying off this debt. Don't object, please.”

“What plan, Katie?”

“Remember that debt is peculiarly *mine*, and the burden of getting rid of it must rest on my shoulders alone. Oh ! if you had only told me about it before, I should not have frittered away my time as I have done !” Katie nearly breaks down again, but, rousing herself vigorously, she goes on rapidly,—

“Do you recollect Mrs. Wilford praising my playing the other morning?”

“Yes, she liked your touch and style, she said.”

“And do you remember how bitterly she was lamenting Miss Metcalf's departure from Eastown, because her three daughters had no one to teach them music now?”

“Yes, Katie, I remember it. The Miss Metcalfs are a loss to the parish, I consider. More people besides Mrs. Wilford will feel their going away from here.”

“I propose taking Miss Helen Metcalf's place, if Mrs.

Wilford will have me. 'Sarah Jane,' Lucy Ann,' and 'Elizabeth Sophia Wilford,' shall lament for a teacher no longer."

Katie bends forward now. As the fire-light falls on her face, her mother sees the old sparkle has come back to her eyes, the old brightness has returned to her manner, and she smilingly presses a kiss on the invalid's brow.

"But, Katie, have you considered all such a proposal involves? It won't do to begin teaching the Miss Wilfords, and then grow weary of the task. You will have to give up many hours—perhaps many pleasanter engagements—in order to be punctual with the necessary duties."

"I have thought of all that, dear mamma, looked at the subject from all points of view; and if neither you nor papa object, Mrs. Wilford shall hear of this to-morrow morning."

But Gertrude does not object, neither does Leonard.

The latter has seen, with intense pain, how heavily the burden of debt is pressing on his wife, in her weakened state of mind and body. He knows the Wilfords are thoroughly worthy, respectable people, and he knows Katie has talents that are now lying dormant and unemployed. A little regular occupation that will bring some of her energy to the surface, and teach her punctuality, will be salutary he is sure. In fact the more he thinks of it, the more the plan strikes him as being a very feasible one indeed. It was one he should never have dreamt of suggesting, but as it has originated from Katie herself, no doubt it will work well.

Katie Thwaites is fairly roused to action at last.

The next morning she is down in the dining-room long before her father. The children are all up and dressed, partly by her, for she has volunteered to help Sarah for the first time. The breakfast is ready; the coffee steaming in the urn. When Mr. Thwaites comes into the room, he finds her standing at the window with Lenny, and they are laughing as they watch the birds scramble to pick up the crumbs they have strewed on the ground outside.

Katie is dressed in the pretty Cashmere, that was one of

poor Miss Hay's last presents to her, and she looks fresh, piquant, and cheerful as ever.

She understands her father's words when at the family altar he asks that they may *all* have "strength and perseverance for the duties of the day," and she softly echoes the prayer in her own heart.

It is a pleasant morning meal, for Mr. Thwaites is pleased to see everything ready, and he has time to talk with his children, and to give Katie some very seasonable advice about the new office she is so eager to take on herself.

Katie carries up her mother's breakfast, and stops to have a little talk with her—cheerful talk—that makes Gertrude smile, and look out on the world more hopefully than she has done since her illness came on.

No fear of Katie's lagging or falling back now. She has taken a long time to grasp the truth, and to understand the secrets of her household. She has been slow in finding out the struggle ever going on there between the wants and the supplies, but now the knowledge has once flashed on her mind, she is as eager as any of them to put her shoulder to the wheel.

Presently she sets out on her walk to Mrs. Wilford's, and a pleasant picture she makes as her quick step wakes up echoes in the frozen road. Her little scarlet feather waves in the breeze, her cheeks glow with exercise, and her eyes have a deep, thoughtful look, as she goes with a brave heart on her expedition.

Mr. Wilford's house is a spik-and-span new one. It stands a few hundred yards off Eastown Lane, and has been built by the worthy owner himself, who has spared no expense in having it according to his heart's desire.

He came to Eastown as a boy, with the legendary five shillings in his pocket, and not a friend to help him on. But by untiring industry, shrewd common sense, and honest dealing, he has merged into the most celebrated, most sought-after builder for miles round the neighbourhood.

Slopeley owes its best mansions and most ambitious structures to his skill ; now he is hard at work altering, and adding to the barracks there.

"Myrtle Villa," as Sarah Jane has poetically named the house, is solid and substantial as its owner. A gravelled walk leads round the neatly-kept lawn to the door. Katie mounts the steps with a spring, and proclaims her arrival with the knocker.

Very pretty and very bright she looks as she is ushered into the morning-room, where Mr. Wilford is writing, and where his wife is busily employed knitting a strip of a white quilt ; and very welcome the old pair make her, as they rise to greet the pastor's daughter.

Some girls would shrink from the task Katie has set herself. Not so Miss Thwaites, however. She comes to the point at once in true earnest, and feels neither shyness nor trepidation in introducing the subject.

Good teaching she is willing to give, and good payment she requires in return—a fair bargain, she considers.

"You said the other day, Mrs. Wilford, your daughters have lost their music teacher. Will you allow me to take Miss Metcalf's place? I have plenty of spare time, and I want so much to be of some use in the world," and Katie's smile is her brightest, and wins their hearts at once.

"Do you really offer to teach my daughters, Miss Thwaites?" exclaims Mrs. Wilford, with great surprise, and still greater satisfaction.

"Yes, Mrs. Wilford. Why shouldn't I?"

"I hardly supposed you would—would"—condescend, she is going to say, but withdraws the word on second thoughts, and substitutes "like the trouble," then adds,—

"My girls will be delighted at having such a chance, for you play most splendidly, Miss Thwaites. I told them about it, and they have been longing so much to hear you. We are most grateful to you for making the proposal—ain't we, Jacob?"

"I am sure we are, Margaret; and now comes our part of the transaction. What terms shall we settle on, Miss Thwaites?"

"Will twenty pounds a year be too much?" replies Katie frankly.

"Too much! I should think not, my dear! You must say *guineas* though, it sounds more business-like," and Jacob smiles. Then, after a minute, taking out a huge pocket-book, he adds, "Do let me give you the quarter's money in advance, Miss Thwaites?"

He has a shrewd idea *guineas* are not very plentiful in the curate's house just now, while sickness has laid the active mother aside, and he feels inward satisfaction as he counts out the five bright sovereigns and the five shillings, and lays them on the table.

"You know the old saying about paying beforehand, Mr. Wilford?" Katie says, with a little merry laugh. "But I will not refuse your advance; indeed, I am very grateful for your suggestion."

Then the days and hours of teaching are arranged in a business-like manner, and Mrs. Wilford laments the absence of her girls.

"They drove over to Slopeley to do some shopping, and will be fairly out of their wits with delight when they come home and hear the good news. Will you try our new piano, Miss Thwaites?"

Katie has no objection; so the builder's wife leads the way up the softly-carpeted stairs, to the front drawing-room, a comfortable, well-furnished apartment, with handsome green rep curtains, green-covered furniture, and a fern-pattern, green carpet.

In a few minutes Katie, with her hat and gloves thrown on a chair beside her, is delighting her two listeners with brilliant fantasias and plaintive reveries. Then, at Mr. Wilford's request—for he is fond of singing, though he is no *great performer* himself in that way—she sings some sacred

songs and fills the room with sweet melody that delights his heart and brings the tears to his eyes.

Katie plays her very best, and sings her best, too, though she has no audience but the two old people, who are no great judges of music after all, but who feel her playing and singing goes straight to the heart.

The new piano is a splendid one, the tone full and and mellow, and Katie's supple fingers well interpret the intense enjoyment a good instrument is to her. With a pleased spiritual delight in her countenance, a rich bloom on her cheek, and a soft glow in her eyes, she plays on before her old, matter-of-fact listeners, with as much pleasure as though the room had been full of delighted guests.

"God has given you a great gift, Miss Thwaites," Jacob says, as he surreptitiously wipes away the tears from his eyes. "A great gift! Dedicate it to His service, my child. How glad I shall be if either of my daughters ever play like you do."

"I will do my best to make them *all* play nicely, so I hope they will be quite ready for me to-morrow morning," Katie says warmly, as she rises and puts on her hat and gloves.

She makes a "detour" on her way home. She turns down the lane and goes to the only street in Eastown that has good shops in it, and here she determines to spend some money, for the five shillings, above the sum required, she considers quite her own property, with which she may do as she likes.

Not a large sum by any means, but Katie shows wonderful ingenuity in laying it out, and laughs as she sees the number of parcels she has to dispose of.

There is some arrowroot for her mother, a New Year's almanac for her father, warm, coarse, woollen gloves for Harry, Lenny, and Maud, and some toys for the little ones.

Not a penny does she lay out for herself. Katie's enjoy-

ment is of a higher order than that, for it consists in giving, and seeing others made happy with her gifts.

"I have not exactly *earned* this money yet," says Katie, joyously, as she displays her treasures to her mother—the five sovereigns included. "But never mind that, mamma. I hope to begin and earn it to-morrow. I will bring you a pen and ink, that you may write to Madame Denton, and I will get the money-order and send it off at once, so we shall have all our debts paid for this quarter."

Gertrude draws her daughter towards her and presses a warm kiss on her hopeful, upturned face. Mother and daughter are beginning to understand each other at last, and to discover there are more points of resemblance in their characters than at first appears probable.

After this the music lessons go on famously. Three times a week during that long winter, in frost or fog, in rain or sunshine, Katie's light foot treads the rough lane, and her heart is nearly as light as her step.

Having something to "do" makes a wonderful difference in her life. The old dulness dies out, the monotony disappears, she no longer condemns Eastown as the "most stupid place in the world."

Mr. Wilford says Miss Thwaites comes into his house like a "ray of sunshine," and his daughters confess "learning music from her is quite a treat, she has such a nice, pleasant way of teaching."

Down deep, underlying all this, there is a priceless wisdom dawning in her heart, the "knowledge that maketh wise unto salvation," and that makes those "readings" with her father in the study the highest enjoyment of the day to her.

Not that Katie is one whit less sunny-spirited, her eye sparkles as brightly as ever, her laugh among the children is just as musical, but her cheerfulness becomes, not a mere impulse, but a "joyful" spirit, loving all beauty and pleasant things, but loving their Creator infinitely more.



CHAPTER XXX.

MORNING DREAMS.

THE level light of a summer's sunrise is falling on the old and new grave-stones in Eastown churchyard—falling with a bright, lingering ray of gold on Aunt Hetty's marble tomb, when Katie and Lenny come briskly in at the large iron gate.

Miss Thwaites, with the usual rebound of a very late riser, has now become a very early one. She is the first astir in the curate's household—even the energetic Sarah can hardly keep pace with her in that respect.

Katie longs to be able to play on the organ, and is taking the up-hill way of teaching herself. She has found a book of rules on the subject, and of late has often given an hour or two before breakfast to practising on the instrument.

It is such a treat to her to get the old church to herself, and seated there, in the early morning, to make sounds of sacred melody resound through the building.

Not that she can play perfectly yet, but she is trying hard to study. Many hours and much perseverance have already been expended on the trying.

With a huge key of the church door in her hand, and with Lenny at her side, as volunteer "bellows blower," she walks in at the gate, pausing for a minute to watch the low, rich-tinted beams of sunlight that fall on the silent graves, and, as she pauses, the sound of music falls on her ears.

"Listen, Lenny; is that the organ? Mr. Somers must have got up earlier than ourselves this morning; we shall lose our practice to-day."

"Oh, but he's sure to leave off playing when he sees you going in."

"But I shouldn't like to interrupt him: perhaps the poor man has only this morning to spare out of all the week for getting the hymns and chants ready for next Sunday; he is in his school all day, you know. He's playing with much more taste than usual, I think."

"Katie, do come into the church for a few minutes, even if you don't practise this morning," urges Lenny.

Then his sister lifts the latch of the door, and steps noiselessly into the aisle. A rich tenor voice is singing "Comfort ye, my people," from Handel's Messiah; singing it not loudly, but with intense pathetic feeling. The listeners pause, hardly daring to move, till the last note of the organ accompaniment rolls away, and then, spell-bound, Lenny whispers,—

"I don't think it's Mr. Somers after all."

"Who else can it be?"

But curious Lenny has gone forward to peep from behind a pillar, and thus confronts Mr. Gurling's eyes, glasses and all.

He rises and comes towards the door at once.

"I hope we haven't disturbed you, Mr. Gurling?"

"Not at all, Miss Thwaites; I have finished; I never expected to see *you* here so early in the morning; you really have great courage," he says, smiling.

"I believe I am earlier than usual to-day; the sunrise was so lovely, it quite tempted me to get up."

They have all three walked towards the open organ, and Mr. Gurling puts forwards his hand to remove the music that is resting on the stand.

"Don't take it away, please; I wish you would sing that *beautiful air* again."

"With pleasure, Miss Thwaites, if you wish it."

He seats himself, and after a few chords, repeats the verse even more touchingly than before. Then at Katie's urging he goes on through several pages of the oratorio, playing or singing as she demands.

He does not tire in the least ; he loves the theme, and he likes to have Katie's appreciation ; he feels as if he could play on half the day if she listened.

And she does seem pleased, as she leans against the old, crumbling, clustered pillar.

Bright hopeful youth and grey reverend age in close contact ! There is a thoughtful, rapt look in her face, a calm, peaceful attention in her whole attitude.

The sun has risen a little by this time ; its slanting rays just touch the lower panes of the large painted window opposite. The coloured rays fall on Katie as she stands there. Large flecks of crimson and purple, amethyst and amber, rest on her dark morning dress, and light it up with mimic splendour.

She might be taken for one of the painted figures escaped out of the old window itself, so rapt is her demeanour, so motionless her figure.

At last Mr. Gurling recollects, and rises quickly.

"Pardon me, Miss Thwaites ; I'm playing on, quite forgetting you came here to use the organ ; will you let me hear you play now ?"

Katie does not refuse ; and ere long finds Mr. Gurling has taken on himself the office of instructor ; the stops of the organ are still a mystery and a perplexity to her ; she uses some too suddenly, some too harshly.

He gives her a few practical hints.

"That sesquialtera stop should never be used alone, Miss Thwaites, and the twelfth, though it makes an excellent combination, is but a poor solo ; a very few more hints will make the use of the stops easy to you."

"I am so much obliged for the hints you have given me

already, for I find a great deal to puzzle me ; I am teaching myself."

"Let me show you how to manage the swell organ, and how to give it more expression."

Katie is an apt pupil. As Mr. Gurling walks down the road with her he tells her so.

"If you will come back to the organ for an hour after breakfast, I will give you some further teaching," he says.

"Thank you ; I should like it very much, but I have some music pupils of my own ; I am giving the Miss Wilfords lessons on the piano, and teaching them to sing."

Mr. Gurling turns round to her with a quiet smile, and she catches an amused glance from his eyes.

"Then, after all, Miss Thwaites, it is you who—"

"Yes," laughs Katie, interrupting him. "It is I who am doomed to teach Jacob Wilford singing ; indirectly, through his daughters, I mean. Now, don't you call that an instance of poetical justice?"

"It looks like it."

"At any rate, I shall never laugh at the old man's attempts at melody again. He is a good, worthy creature, and I like him very much indeed," asserts the young lady, with considerable warmth of manner.

After this, many morning studies on the organ take place, and Katie improves rapidly under Mr. Gurling's hints and teachings.

Richard has long since given his friendship to Leonard Thwaites, and thinks there is no one whose opinion he values so highly ; but soon he finds he has room in his heart for friendship towards Mr. Thwaites' daughter also, and then he begins to set a value on her opinions too.

He calls it friendship, but is soon roused to the consciousness that his feeling towards her is of a much deeper nature.

One day Lady West drives over to the curate's house in her pony carriage ; she finds Mrs. Thwaites alone, for Katie

has not yet returned from the Wilford's, and the boys are in the study, at their lessons, with Leonard.

For the first time since that evening long ago at Grey Towers, Alice is cordial and frank in her manner; she throws back her veil, and holds up her face to be kissed, like a naughty child who has resolved to try and be good in future.

"Such a treat to see you again, Mrs. Thwaites! I have made the most of my holiday, and have come over for a chat."

"I am very pleased to have you here. But what constitutes your holiday?"

"Stanley is gone to London for a few days, and his absence is a positive relief sometimes," Alice asserts with a quick, nervous laugh.

"Oh, Alice! don't say *that*, even in jest."

"But suppose I mean it? You don't expect to find us model husband and wife. Do you, Mrs. Thwaites?"

"I expect to find you a wise, genial, right-thinking, loyal wife, Alice. Happiness lies pretty much in the wife's power, I assure you. If she fulfils her duties thoroughly, things will come right in the end oftener than we expect."

"But you don't know Stanley as I know him. It is very hard to get on with him."

"All the more reason you should pray for guidance. The more difficult your path is, the more light you require on it."

"I believe I should be far happier if I did not think so much of bygone days, and compare what my life is to what it might have been."

"Then don't do it, my dear child! Brooding so much on the past has a tendency to unfit one for the duties of the present."

"I wonder whether Ralph thinks as much of the past as I do?"

"I'm quite sure the remembrance does not prevent his fulfilling the present obligations of life to the utmost. I am

certain whatever he has to do is cheerfully and conscientiously done."

"Ah! he was always so good—so much better than I ever was. I often get quite puzzled when I see how tangled and perplexed things have got."

"May the Holy Spirit lead and direct you, Alice. He can and will, if you only ask Him in faith."

Tears rise in Lady West's eyes, and she is silent for a minute; then she wipes them away quickly, and begins to talk of Grey Towers.

"I hope your friends there are all well?"

"Oh yes, thank you; but I seldom see them, for Stanley still keeps up his resentment with my father. Philip drove over part of the way here with me just now, and I dine at Grey Towers this evening."

Gertrude looks up with a quick glance of inquiry, which Alice interprets at once.

"Oh! don't fancy I'm going to perpetrate an act of disobedience, Mrs. Thwaites. I told Stanley I was going there, and he said I might do so if I didn't ask him to accompany me."

Presently Lady West rises to go away.

"How is Katie? I have not seen her for an age."

"She is quite well, thank you. She is down at Mrs. Wilford's just now, giving the girls a music lesson. I expect her home shortly."

"Perhaps I may meet her, as I am going in that direction. If I do, may I ask her to take a drive with me? I will set her down here on my return."

"I am sure Katie will be much pleased at having such a treat."

So it comes to pass that when Katie emerges, fresh and pretty in her neat white piqué dress, from the entrance of Myrtle Villa, the clanging of the great iron gate has hardly *died away* when she sees Lady West's carriage stop suddenly *and wait at the lower end of the lane.*

Alice holds out her delicately-gloved hand as soon as she comes up.

"I have just seen your mamma, Miss Thwaites. She has consented to your taking a drive with me, if you have no objection."

"Objection!" It is the very thing Katie likes. Driving past the fragrant, flower-wreathed hedges, with the pretty, pensive-looking Lady West for her companion, is a taste of positive enjoyment. She seats herself beside Alice in a little tumult of satisfaction.

It is delicious to be wafted rapidly along, with the cool breeze fanning her cheeks, and to see the quivering leaves of the trees, giving glimpses through their arches of the fleecy white clouds that float over the clear blue sky. Lady West does not talk much, but she notices the quiet delight in the girl's face—her quick appreciation of every bit of fresh prospect—every artistic grouping of trees, or rocks, or ruins, and every good effect of light and shade.

"I suspect you must be somewhat of an artist, Miss Thwaites?"

"I'm very fond of pretty scenery, and, do you know, this drive banishes no end of my old prejudices. I thought there was nothing either grand or picturesque in the neighbourhood of Eastown, but every turn in this road exhibits new and fresh beauties. Oh! how you must delight in your drives, Lady West."

Alice looks down at the enthusiastic countenance of her companion, and smiles faintly, as she says,—

"I ought to enjoy them, I suppose; but there are times when even the beauties of scenery cease to give enjoyment. Nature does not always appeal to the heart in the same glad language you hear now."

"Is it nature's fault, or the heart's fault?"

"The heart's fault, of course. Nature is lovely in all her moods. But I don't think beautiful views remove despondency; they rather add to it by force of contrast. I can

imagine even the bright blue skies of Italy or the grand scenery of Switzerland would fail to rouse some weary, heart-broken people to positive enjoyment."

"How strange sorrow should have such a blinding effect!"

"I daresay, Katie, you can hardly imagine what a *great* trouble means—I mean a trouble that dashes the brightness out of one's life."

"Oh no! and I hope I never shall. I hope I shall never grow cold, and hard, and callous enough to close my heart to the beauty of the visible creation. It seems to me now as if its glad beauty and variety is sent to tell us of a Father's reflected love. It must be dreadful to shroud one's self in one's own selfish gloom and morbidness," Katie says with warmth.

"I see you cannot understand how effectually a past grief can cast a shadow over the present."

"Why should it, Lady West? One may as well not enjoy the warmth and sunshine of to-day because yesterday was dark and gloomy. I don't think it right to be for ever brooding over bygone sorrows and past feelings."

Katie has not the most remote idea her companion is giving a veiled-up glimpse of her own heart's history in her plaint. She imagines Lady West is speaking of the general effect of some great, over-mastering grief, and answers in the same strain. Not for worlds would she seem to trench on ground so delicate as Alice's personal experience, or attempt to offer advice in so difficult a matter.

"I used to be quite as fond of pretty effects as you are, Katie. There are charming little haunts round Grey Towers that would delight you; they once seemed like glimpses of fairy-land to me, and I knew every nook and corner of the place. I have seen some of the magic tints die away though, and some of the glamour fade off."

Katie looks up quickly, she wonders whether after all Lady West is not alluding to something nearer than "gene-

ral effects." Has she had some great grief herself that still imprints itself in the sadness her face so often wears? Katie wonders.

"Our own moods and feelings generally colour things for us, and clouds soon gather and make all dark," sighs Alice.

"Then why not try and look beyond the cloud?" Katie asks.

"I suppose only a true Christian can do that."

"A true Christian is sure to," Katie says warmly.

These two—of such different dispositions, and different temperaments—are beginning to be drawn together in sympathy. The very qualities that seem so opposite, promise to become a bond of union after all. Katie's sunny joyousness of spirit is absolutely thawing some of Lady West's reserve and morbidness.

Alice is beginning to enjoy the conversation, when some one is heard running after the carriage, and shouting at the top of his voice,—

"Thomas, stop for a minute; I think Mr. Burges is calling us."

It is Philip, running, panting, and gasping.

"What a pretty race you have led me, Alice. I thought you were going to wait a little beyond the village for me."

"I don't remember promising to do so."

"I took it for granted, then. What a run I've had across the fields, but it cut off fully four or five miles of the journey. I met the postman, and he told me you had driven round the point."





CHAPTER XXXI.

ON THE COMMON.

PHILIP has got into the carriage by this time, and is shaking hands with Katie.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Miss Thwaites."

"Yes, she has taken pity on me to-day. We were quite enjoying our drive before you came."

"Oh! I hope you won't enjoy it less because of my presence. Why did you choose this way, Alice?"

"I wanted to show Miss Thwaites the pretty views."

"Talk of views! They're nothing to what one can see from the common. If you want to see a prime bit of scenery, with grand panoramic effects, drive *there* I should say."

"Should you like that?" Alice turns to Katie.

"Very much, indeed. I walked there once with papa, but he never has time for such long journeys now."

The necessary orders are given, and the little party are soon whirling along the soft mossy path over the tract of moorland that lies a few miles from Eastown.

A favourite haunt this for the working population on high days and holidays. Picnics are often made to this place, when the patches of green sward between the clumps of golden gorse make capital extempore tables.

But now, in the noon of that lazy summer day, the place is all in solitude, silence, and repose.

"First-rate lungs these for Eastown!" asserts Philip, with something of his father's abrupt manner.

"I only wonder people don't take advantage of this fine common, and come here oftener. There is not a single creature in sight except one man, and he seems to be hunting for rabbits," Lady West says, as she looks round in all directions.

Katie sees in an instant the 'man' is only throwing a stick or two for his dog's amusement, and is not in the least in chase of any helpless, furry burrow-dweller.

"Why I declare that is 'Parson Gurling,' with his hideous little terrier snapping and barking round him. He's coming up the pathway through the brake in this direction," exclaims Philip.

Mr. Gurling walks quickly along, glancing slightly at Lady West's carriage as he advances. He raises his hat, and prepares to pass on with a bow and a smile.

But when he sees Katie's bright, well-known face beside Alice's paler one, when he notices Philip Burges bending down towards the former, his manner all eagerness, familiarity, and admiration, Mr. Gurling half stops with a hesitating, irresolute air. He flushes visibly, and with a quick, stern look at Philip resumes his walk.

"I declare Gurling's growing dangerous! He looked a thousand daggers at me. His wrath seemed to culminate in a focus, and to flash out on me through his glasses. I wonder what I've done to vex him. Ay, Miss Thwaites?"

Philip turns to Katie with a loud laugh, and catches sight of firmly-compressed lips, the shadow of a frown, and also of a blush which rapidly mounts to her face.

"Why, positively you look half-inclined to take up the cudgels in Gurling's defence!"

"I don't think Mr. Gurling needs any one to defend him. He is quite capable of taking his own part," retorts Katie, not returning Philip's merriment in the slightest degree.

Once upon a time she has herself indulged in a laugh or

two at the grave, shy curate, but those times are over ; she has not any inclination to laugh at him now, she respects him far too much for that, and she is not going to join in Philip Burges' very broad mirth at him either. His unrestrained merriment is really odious to her. Then too, the idea of calling poor "Zit" a "hideous little terrier"—it is a positive libel on the animal. He is ten times nicer, and a far handsomer dog than all those in the Grey Towers' kennels put together ; and she likes him far better, so she does !

Besides, some instinct tells Katie *why* Mr. Gurling looked so surprised, or angry, or whatever that sudden change of countenance might mean. He always seems discomposed when he meets Philip and her together, and that has often been the case lately.

Idle, aimless, sauntering Philip has now and then wandered down Eastown lane on the very days and hours when he knows Katie will be returning from Mrs. Wilford's.

He has begun to make a practice of lingering at her side, talking in his lively, rattling, gossiping, careless manner, and not particularly caring whether Miss Thwaites wishes for his society or not.

"Anything by way of relaxation in Eastown, and Katie Thwaites' face is worth looking at, in whatever mood she may be," he says.

Katie rouses up from her rather indignant musings, to find Philip is talking about an archery-meeting, to take place a couple of miles from Eastown.

"One never sees you at any of these gatherings, Miss Thwaites. I call it very unkind of you. We sadly want a few fresh faces to make the thing worth the trouble of going to. I'm tired of seeing the tribes of Leslie and Hunt over and over again so often. Sometimes I think I'll throw the whole thing up, and eschew archery-meetings in future."

"How soon you tire of things, Philip ! Only the other

day you were all eagerness to get the meetings up, and now you say they bore you."

"Right you are, Alice. They do bore me. I've half a mind to retire from civilized society altogether; fling over the artificial usages of life, that are all sham, and brag, and pretence, and emigrate to some wild prairie. *There* extra refinement would be unknown, and the flimsy atmosphere of trick, and falseness, and hypocrisy would not be dreamt of. I wonder what dad would say to my emigrating, Alice?"

"I think he would say you are much better off at Grey Towers."

"All very fine that! A fellow gets rusty in one spot. One might as well be a galley-slave as be chained there for ever. I envy the 'buccaneers,' the 'brigands,' and all those sort of people who lead a free, untrammelled life; roam where they please, and own no law but their own wild wills."

Philip rattles on carelessly—giving glimpses, however, amid all his random utterances, of a mind within him unsatisfied and restless. There is more truth than he would like to confess in his wild rhapsody.

Taken from the daily routine of office life, and plunged into a scene of idleness and luxury, Philip has not yet found aim or occupation of sufficient interest to fill up his time. All play and no work is not agreeing well with the man who once tested the savour of real, hard labour. The very reaction is wearing him out. He dawdles about the place, striving to feel an interest in the horses he does not understand, and for which in his heart he has not any real liking.

He tries to enjoy amusements for which he has no taste. He rushes into society where he does not feel at ease, and is ready to blame everybody but himself for the result.

Like the bee, whose wings are clogged with too much honey, he finds out that after all he is making but a very slow progress.

No one would advocate constant work. The machinery must stand still sometimes, to be freshly oiled and polished, or the very friction will wear it out; and, on the other hand, no one would defend total inaction, for we all know how the delicate wheels, and springs, and chains, and screws get rusted and eaten up with corrosion.





CHAPTER XXXII.

THE NEW RECTOR.

RICHARD GURLING is in truth sorely troubled at seeing Katie driving along in Lady West's carriage, in such apparently cordial intimacy with Philip Burges.

At first he can hardly understand why such a circumstance should have power to vex and annoy him so much. He knows Philip's character well, having gauged him as it is in the power of silent, reflective natures to do. He thinks he understands Katie pretty well also, and he makes up his mind the more these two people advance in intimacy with each other, the worse it will be for Katie.

He wonders why he should care so much about it; but after pacing to and fro on the moor for an hour or two, with the soft breeze waving the fresh scent of the heather past him, and the solitude, as it were, stirring up the very depths and secrets of his heart—then he becomes conscious how dear Katie has become to him.

He is half-pleased, half-grieved at the discovery—pleased, at the glimpse of a possible happiness dawning for him, better and brighter than anything the world has ever given him before—grieved, lest Katie may already have bestowed her affections elsewhere.

Handsome, plausible, idle men like Philip Burges, very often manage to gain an influence over a woman's heart;

yet Katie Thwaites does not altogether seem the sort of girl to be won by such a man as Philip.

She never would be so blind ! so infatuated ! so foolish !

Mr. Gurling has all the common to himself on this fair morning ; so he paces to and fro on the thyme-scented herbage, treading down the rustling dwarf heather, and sending whole swarms of bees away from the honey-laden blossoms.

Zit walks droopingly at his master's heels, following his uncertain zigzag pace with moody determination, wondering with all a dog's wonder, that his master ceases to notice him.

How still and calm it all seems on that lonely moor ! A flock of rooks make quite a commotion as they pause in their flight, and come down for awhile, and strut about to air their black satin suits, and then speed on with steady flight again.

Mr. Gurling notices all this, with abstracted consciousness. He is thinking of the man who lately passed him seated by Katie's side, and he is thinking of Katie herself.

Thinking of her joyous nature, bright as a landscape on a sunny day, yet mingled now and then with that touch of sweet womanly sedateness and reserve ; thinking of her ripening beauty—her pleasant ways tempered with that earnest, thoughtful manner she wears sometimes ; thinking of it all over and over, till he finally decides Katie is not in the least likely to be attracted by the shallow pretence of real love, Philip would ever have it in his power to bring her.

Katie will look for something deeper than that surface tinsel ; something worthier than the selfish admiration that is attracted by a pretty face, and cares not for more enduring qualities.

When Mr. Gurling has thought over all this in his rapid paces on the lonely moor—when by deep and rigid self-examination of his own heart, he satisfies himself his own *love for Katie* is genuine and true—then, he has no inten-

tion of keeping silence about it. He feels it contrary to his principle to cherish, or show indirectly what he cannot proclaim honourably to those concerned.

So he seeks an interview with Mr. Thwaites at once—coming into the study just when Katie has finished her usual reading with her father.

When Mr. Gurling enters the room, the books are still open on the table, and Leonard and his daughter are talking on some point of absorbing interest—he explaining—she questioning, and grasping the facts with her clear, quick intellect.

"I have disturbed you, I fear," Richard says, quickly stepping back to the door.

Katie rises,—*"Oh! no, Mr. Gurling, I ought to have finished some time ago. Shall I put away the books, papa?"*

"Never mind now, my dear." He places a chair for Mr. Gurling, who however stands to watch Katie walk out of the room.

"I half wished Miss Thwaites would remain here, for my visit this afternoon is on her account."

Leonard looks at his guest inquiringly,—

"I have come to ask if you will give your daughter to be my wife, some day."

"So soon! Is my little Katie wanted so soon? Oh! I cannot spare my daughter yet, Richard."

"I don't want to marry her at once, Mr. Thwaites, but give me your permission to find out whether I have any hope of gaining a place in her affections."

"But she is so young—so very young!" persists her father, still unwilling to believe the time has arrived when Katie, his pupil and darling, must be wooed and won from him.

"She is nearly eighteen, Mr. Thwaites. Only the other morning she told me distinctly she was just seventeen when she left school, and that was quite a year ago," persists persevering Richard.

"I believe you are right. Time passes more rapidly than one fancies sometimes. I tell you candidly, Richard, there is no one I know to whom I would sooner give Katie than yourself, and I feel sure I speak for her good in every sense of the word when I say this. But leave my child undisturbed in the parent nest a little longer."

Mr. Gurling walks about the room impatiently.

"What do you call a 'little longer,' Mr. Thwaites?"

"Wait till she is eighteen—only two months more—and then I give you full and free permission to win her if you can. Katie is not the girl to make a promise without she means it, and may God's blessing rest on you both."

Something like a mist gathers in Mr. Thwaites' eyes as he speaks thus. He feels it hard to give up his child, even to the man he most approves. A pang of regret mingles with the satisfaction he feels in anticipating her coming happiness.

Mr. Gurling is forced to be satisfied with the concession, though even at the moment, the thought flashes vividly through his mind—

"I won't even promise to keep silent for two months, if I see any more of Philip Burges' odious attentions to Katie."

He accepts Mr. Thwaites' invitation to stay to tea that afternoon; and the two gentlemen walk into the dining-room together, soon after.

Mr. Gurling has made up his mind to be the very model of reticence and discreetness; but, somehow, he can't altogether keep a sort of consciousness from appearing every now and then in his manner towards Katie.

There is a nervousness in the very eagerness with which he turns over her music, as he lingers at the piano, and a deep tenderness in his tones when he speaks to her, though the subject of his conversation is duly and strictly kept within the bounds of every-day, colloquial propriety.

Katie notices his manner towards her. What young girl would not?

A glad light springs into her eyes as she meets his—a quick throb rises at her heart as she detects his emotion—for it is very visible, though Richard thinks he has hidden it so completely. Katie is certain some great change has come between her and Mr. Gurling, though what the change means, is more than she can determine, and the puzzling and trying to solve the enigma, keeps her awake half the night.

Just a week after this, news comes to Eastown of the death of Mr. Gurling, Richard's uncle. He has succumbed to his tedious ailments at last, and has found a grave in a foreign land.

Even the mild air of Cannes has not had power to give him health and a longer life.

The good people at Eastown do not pretend to be overwhelmed with grief at the death of their long-absent rector. He has been too little amongst them to make such a display of feeling probable.

Of late years he has been almost a stranger in the parish, and in consequence, has drifted away from his place in the homes and the hearts of his flock.

All thoughts are soon turned towards the possible successor, and on this subject Eastown has but one wish.

Mr. Jacob Wilford comes to Leonard's study one morning, with a paper carefully folded up, which, when opened, displays the names of the chief people in the parish.

"We didn't consult you about this before, sir, for fear you'd object. This is a petition we've got up amongst us to send to Sir Thomas Forest, who has the Eastown living in his gift, and a valuable family one it is."

Leonard looks over the names, but cannot yet comprehend the drift of the document.

"We've petitioned Sir Thomas to give *you* the living, Mr. Thwaites, and we don't think he'll refuse to accede to the wishes of the people here."

"I'm sure it's very kind and thoughtful of you all, and I

feel grateful for the interest you take in me," the curate replies, with some emotion.

"We *all* want you for our rector, sir. You've worked long and earnestly amongst us ; many's the one that has to thank you for leading them to salvation by bringing the blessed Gospel to their view ; many's the **poor** soul has been led to Christ by your hand. We don't forget the time, sir, when your kindness to the poor fever-stricken patients nearly cost you **your** own life, and there isn't a man in the parish but **would** sign that petition if we asked him."

Leonard is much moved when he repeats all this to Gertrude afterwards. He seems to think infinitely more about the good feeling of the people towards him, than he does of the chance of getting the living, and his wife sees this.

"Don't you think you are quite sure of the vacancy, Leonard ? I should say there is not the shadow of a shade of a doubt about it ; but I suppose it won't make any change with regard to Richard Gurling. You'll still keep him as your curate, won't you ? "

"Oh, yes ! when I get the living Richard shall stay where he is," returns Leonard, with a smile. "Gerty, you remind me of that very homely proverb about 'counting your chickens,'—you know the rest."

"Now, Leonard, don't quote proverbs against me. They always sound like a damper to my hopes. I call this not an 'airy castle,' but a real, tangible expectation, founded on a good, solid basis. You are quite *sure* of being rector of Eastown before long."

"If it is good for me and for the people, it will be given to me, no doubt. God knows what is best. I am content to leave it all in His Hands."

Not the less does Mrs. Thwaites think about it though. Ere long she has settled which room in the rectory will make the best nursery, and Sarah has speculated on what

a lot of jam she will be able to manufacture, when she has all the rich fruit in the rectory garden at her hand, to pick and choose as she pleases.

Richard Gurling calls in by-and-by. He is very sorry about his uncle, who has been kind to him in his way, though they have had but little personal intercourse of late years.

"Poor Mr. Gurling! even the mild air of Cannes did not work a cure," remarks Mrs. Thwaites.

"No, indeed; and I really think my poor uncle would have lived longer had he remained in his parish, and employed himself moderately in its duties. It must have been a wretched listless life out there, with nothing to do but brood over his own ailments."

"It must have been very lonely for him," Gertrude says.

"I am sure he must often have felt it so, Mrs. Thwaites. It was a sad thing to die away from all his friends."

Ere long Richard is told about the petition, and he congratulates Leonard at once.

"Of course you'll have the living, my dear sir, and I'm heartily glad of it. No man has a greater right to be rector of Eastown than yourself."

"You all seem to arrange it very pleasantly for me, but remember, I'm not rector yet," returns Leonard with a smile.

For three whole days Mr. Thwaites' appointment is looked on as sure. Both in his house and in the parish it is talked of as a certain thing, despite Leonard's oft-repeated words of caution and doubt.

But on the fourth morning, Richard Gurling comes into the curate's dining-room, just after early post-time, and throws an open letter on the table.

"I never was so mortified and grieved in my life, never!" His face is pale to the very lips, and he looks as if some great misfortune had befallen him.

"What is the matter, Gurling?" asks Mr. Thwaites, rising from the breakfast-table.

"Sir Thomas Forest has actually given *me* the living; me, who have neither right nor claim to such a thing! To *me*, who never applied for it, and never even dreamt of having it. Will you read the letter, Mrs. Thwaites?"

But Gertrude seems too startled to be able to do anything of the sort; so Mr. Thwaites takes it up and speedily makes the contents known.

Then the astonished audience discover, Sir Thomas Forest once made a solemn promise to Mr. Gurling, that when he died, his nephew should have the living; and he would not for worlds break a promise—a sacred promise made to the dead.

There is no mistaking Richard's feeling of sorrow and perplexity at the position in which he is placed. His eyes droop, his lips tremble as he exclaims,—

"Don't think my regret a sham! it is genuine as regret can be. I am utterly *ashamed* to stand before you, Mr. Thwaites, when I remember what disappointment I have brought both on your household and parish."

"It isn't your fault, my dear fellow!" Leonard says, cheerfully, taking on himself the office of consoler.

"That it is not; I had no idea such a promise was ever made till the letter reached me just now. Of course I shall throw up the gift at once; I can never place myself in such a false position."

"Come, come now, Richard. Let us quietly talk the matter over together in my study," and Leonard takes the bewildered rector by the arm, and gently draws him out of the room.

Gertrude turns to the window, and stands there silently for a minute or two. She is mourning over this fresh disappointment, but thinking all the time how much worse it would have been had a *stranger*, and not Richard Gurling, been the chosen one.

Presently Katie looks up with a flushed face. "Any other than papa would be very much vexed about this."

"Don't you think your father is vexed, Katie?"

"Mr. Gurling is infinitely more so. Do you know, mamma, I think *he* deserves the most pity in this matter."

"Why should he be pitied? Mr. Gurling is a most fortunate young man. He has only been a short time a curate, and has come into the best living in the county; while your poor father has been toiling, year after year, giving the best part of his life—mind and body—to his people, and yet he remains on a stinted income, with no hope of preferment."

"All that makes it harder for Mr. Gurling. He sees all *that*, and is covered with the deepest humiliation in consequence. He feels the bitter injustice of it all." There is a kind of awe in Katie's voice.

"Perhaps after all he will give up the living. He seemed to hint at such a thing just now."

"How can he give it up, mamma? A promise to the dead is so solemn and so binding."

Mrs. Thwaites does not reply, but stands looking out on the street, down which a crowd of noisy children are trooping to the day-school. She thinks of the many hopes she has seen end in disappointment—thinks of them with sadness she cannot dispel, and she silently asks for more resignation, more faith.

Her husband comes in at the door, and looks from mother to daughter, with a smile on his lip.

"Here, Katie, Mr. Gurling wants you in the study. Perhaps you can manage to console him better than I can."

"Poor fellow! He's taking it dreadfully to heart," continues Leonard, as he returns alone to his wife. "I never saw him so disturbed and dejected before."

"You and Katie are enough to provoke any one, Leonard! Why will you both persist in pitying Richard Gurling? *He* seems one of fortune's favourites, and it is you, *you*, my own darling, who require pity."

"Why, Gerty?"

"Because everything has happened so differently to what we expected."

"Ah ! you were all very kind and good in wishing my advancement ; I never really expected it, you know ; and now events prove that in reality I had no chance of the living. By-the-bye, I have given Richard permission to speak to Katie to-day, so perhaps after all, Gerty, our darling child may find her future home in the rectory, though we are not to take up our abode there."





CHAPTER XXXIII.

EASTOWN BELLS AGAIN.

NOT long afterwards, Mr. Gurling and Katie return to the room together, and then it becomes evident the young lady has proved a sympathetic consoler after all.

The new rector is wonderfully calmed ; indeed, when he looks down into the sweet face of his betrothed, he almost seems to have forgotten the disquietude his honours have brought him.

"Katie has promised to be my wife," he says, as he leads her over to her mother.

"Then may God in His tender mercy give His best blessing to you both, and may your married life be as happy as mine has been !" Gertrude whispers, as she presses her child to her heart.

Leonard catches the whisper, and exclaims,—

"Ah, Katie ! though your mother speaks so warmly of the happiness of her married life, she has not had a scene of unclouded sunshine, I assure you. There have been many trials and many sorrows strewed here and there over it."

"But even trials fall lightly when they are shared. True affection is a wonderful salve," Gertrude retorts.

"Yes, Gerty, you speak truly there. Next to God's own precious love, I am sure true earthly affection is His best gift. *We* did not begin our married life with the same bright

prospects you young people set out with. *I* was not a newly-fledged rector when I married," Leonard says, smilingly, as he turns towards the pair of lovers.

"Ah! now you touch the sore point again, Mr. Thwaites. You rouse up my perplexities once more. Remember, I should never have courage to proclaim the news to the Eastown people, had not your daughter promised to be my shield. They will have to strike at me through *her* now."

Katie meets his look with a smile, and a soft glow beams from her eyes. She will do him service in this way or any other, for has she not promised henceforth to share all the sorrows and joys, the duties and trials of life with him? Her heart is brave, her faith strong for the coming future.

All Eastown is, of course, in a state of ferment when they find their petition to Sir Thomas Forest has failed. They are furiously disappointed at not having Mr. Thwaites for their rector. But the second piece of news, that the new rector is soon to be Mr. Thwaites' son-in-law—Miss Katie's husband—falls like soothing balm on their wounded spirits. Most of them decide that, *next* to their own old tried friend, Mr. Thwaites, Mr. Gurling is the very man they would choose. For even in the short time he has been in the parish, the young man has won their hearts by his zeal and Christian kindness. They perceive he is thoroughly in earnest, doing his Master's work for love of that Master.

Still, some of the Eastown worthies shake their heads. "We shall lose Mr. Thwaites, though. Depend on it, he'll never stay here as curate to so young a man as Mr. Gurling, son-in-law and all as he may be."

But after a time they see Mr. Thwaites goes about the parish as usual, bearing no sign of humiliation. They perceive also Mr. Gurling takes no airs of authority on himself. If there is any emulation, it is which can be the most unselfish, the most lowly-minded, the most zealous in winning souls for Christ.

So Eastown is satisfied. Their forebodings are hushed, and they join hand and heart in making preparations for the coming marriage. Everybody wants to do something, and Jacob Wilford, as spokesman, comes to Leonard again,—

“Have you any objection to letting the people place a few flowers in the lane that leads to the churchyard, sir?”

“Why don't you ask the *rector's* permission?” Leonard asks pleasantly.

“Well, in this matter we don't think it needful, sir. The fact is, some of the young people want to pay Miss Katie a little tribute of respect on her wedding-day.”

“Very kind of them, I'm sure!”

“And of course our new rector comes in for a share of the attention also.”

Thus it happens that when Katie, on her wedding-day, looking like a “grown-up fairy,” as Lenny describes her, drives up near the churchyard gates, she glances through the carriage windows in amazement.

A triumphal arch has sprung up just before the entrance, all wreathed with the most gorgeous summer flowers. Clusters of roses, pure white lilies, glowing scarlet verbenas, starry jasmine, many-tinted geraniums, and a host of other blossoms, make a structure of exquisite mosaic beauty.

Simple tribute of affection this!—the offering of kindly hearts and willing hands. Katie's eyes fill with quick tears as she looks out.

“Oh, mamma dear! this is too much. How kind and good everybody is to us!”

The wedding party is in itself only a small one—the Thwaites family, two Miss Wilsons as bridesmaids, and a college friend of Mr. Gurling's as best man.

But the church is crowded with lookers-on. Multitudes of eyes seem to gaze at Katie as she slowly makes her way up the aisle. For one brief minute she almost loses her firm bearing at the unexpected ovation prepared for her.

Galleries and pews—standing room and sitting room! Every available space in the church is crowded, for everybody in the parish who could possibly get away from their work has put on their best clothes and come to see Miss Katie married.

Not so fine a marriage by any means as Alice Burges had—none of the pomp and glitter and show—but a truer, holier marriage by far; for it is the union of loyal hearts and pure affections—the union of immortal and undying faculties—and the sweet new present gives promise of a happy future.

Mrs. Thwaites will miss her daughter, for of late Katie has taken such an active part in parish, in school, and household, that even Sarah is satisfied, and wonders however they will get on without “Miss Katie.” But they do not complain—they know she is only gone forth into a wider sphere, where her bright young vigour will find increased scope.

The bells chime out on that lazy summer morning as blithely as bells can chime; for the Eastown ringers are doing their best on this occasion, and the joyous sounds mingle with the clear singing of the lark that soars above the old church, wondering, perhaps, what mortals are making such a stir about.

The villagers talk about “Miss Katie’s wedding” as they take their way down the lanes towards home, or saunter about in groups through the fields. They have quite a holiday-feeling this morning. The event seems an inspiring one to everybody, and they smile to each other as they chat about it.

From end to end of the parish it is the one theme of conversation on this particular day. Nothing else is talked about, and if this pen could register all the pleasant wishes and all the kind words that are echoed forth from voice and heart in tones of enthusiastic warmth, a long page would be added to Katie’s history.

Jacob Wilford sums up his measure of praise and blessing in a few words. His wife is waiting at home to hear all about the wedding ; and she listens with intense interest to the vivid description. " God bless them both, and give them happiness, for they're well worthy of it !" adds the old man with twinkling eyes, and Margaret bends her head, and softly says " Amen ! "





CHAPTER XXXIV.

SOME NEWS.

ONE whole year has passed away since the morning of Katie's wedding, and a glad new summer is again making sunshine at Eastown. It is just such a day as that on which Squire Burges and his family first arrived at Grey Towers, but Tom does not look at the beauties of the place now with the keenly admiring eye he possessed then.

He has got used to it by this time for one thing, and just now letters have come to him by post that do not add to his calmness of temper.

Mrs. Burges and he are both lingering over the breakfast-table, and each of them is engaged with the newly-arrived epistles.

One letter is from Philip, for that worthy is at last gone to London with a view of doing something for himself, by settling down to a profession.

He has decided on studying for a barrister, and the vision of some day being a Lord Chancellor rises in his mind's eye.

Ever sanguine at any new beginning, and ever tired as soon as the newness wears off, he is just now taking a holiday for a week or so down at Richmond, with a couple of men of the Inner Temple, who, like himself, are fond of boating.

Philip's letter this morning does not please his father, for in it there is a strong demand for more money, and his allowance is already very ample.

"That careless fellow thinks there is no limit to my purse—it's just ask and have with him. Here, Hannah, read over this precious production from your son."

Flimsy and flippant the letter certainly is, as Philip tries in his free, jocose manner, to argue that a holiday at Richmond, with a couple of chums, is better than working hard in town,—

"Think of the fusty law volumes we can read together, and the instructive conversations we can hold, as with the best havannahs in our lips, we float serenely on the placid river. Don't grudge the money, dear dad, the gain will be worth twice the paltry lucre."

Mrs. Burges glances over the wordy epistle with a sigh. Her own letters, brought by that post, and doled out of that leather bag, are not altogether pleasant.

People seem to think the Grey Towers exchequer is exhaustless, so exorbitant is the crave for money—more money! The dressmaker's bill alone would in former days have kept both herself and Alice in clothes for twelve months. But then, when they lived at Kingston, both she and her daughter chose the material, and helped with its making up.

Now, the large-hearted dressmaker—fashionable, of course—has been most unbounded in her expenditure, and has spared no expense in material or trimming; so the account has run up, as only the initiated know how bills of the sort can run up.

The boys' school bills have also been enclosed to Mrs. Burges.

All four sons are at expensive schools now. This term it seems perfectly wonderful how much the extras have increased, and extended, and widened.

Boys, masters, and all, seemed imbued with the idea they may all try to dip as deeply as possible in the squire's purse.

Mrs. Burges slips all these bills into her pocket.

"I sha'n't show them to Tom now. He seems to have quite enough to worry him already," thinks she, as she sees him frowning over a large stiff paper he holds in his hands.

"Confound that fellow's impudence, I say!"

"What's the matter now, Tom?"

"This paper is from some lawyer called *Atkin*, ordering me—yes, mind you, not inviting, but *ordering* me—to attend *Ralph Burges'* funeral to-morrow."

"Oh, Tom! Is poor *Ralph Burges* dead?"

"So it seems; but the fellow doesn't condescend to give me any particulars. Why he wants to drag *Philip* and myself all the way to *Radcliff*, is more than I can imagine."

Mrs. Burges is bending over a letter she holds in her hand, not seeing one word of it; a deep red flush has overspread her face, and she is thinking of *Ralph*—poor *Ralph*!—longing to ask questions about him, or to express commiseration for him, but not venturing to do so while Tom is in that mood. She meekly looks up and says,—

"You'll have to telegraph to *Richmond* for *Philip*, if he is wanted also."

"I'll do nothing of the sort. If I *must* go, I suppose I *must*; but I sha'n't send for *Philip*."

"Do you think *Leonard Thwaites* is summoned also? He is a nearer relative of poor *Ralph's* than you are."

"He may be. Perhaps *Atkin* thinks a family gathering is the correct thing. It's too bad to entrust the management of affairs to such dolts. As I have business in *Eastown* this morning I'll call at *Thwaites'* house, and ask him about it."

Presently Mrs. Burges watches her husband mount his favourite bay horse, and ride down the lawn, turning round once or twice to give some remembered order to his groom ere he finally disappears from view.

A stout, ruddy, broad-chested, broad-shouldered, well-dressed country squire Tom looks, as he leans back on his saddle, his delicately-gloved hand resting on the animal as he loudly issues his commands.

No look of sorrow shadows his face, no word of regret has passed his lips, though that kinsman of his is lying dead, and still in that far-away home he has chosen.

Mrs. Burges feels the thick tears rise in her eyes as she gazes out, and the smooth lawn and leafy trees are blotted from her view. Thoughts rush into her mind that shape themselves something in this way,—

“And so this is the end, is it? Poor Ralph! cut off in the prime of life, dying, with no loving voice near to soothe his last moments, no wife’s hand to wipe the death-dews from his brow. What will Alice say to this, I wonder? Will she in her heart reproach herself, or us, or any one? Had she married Ralph, she would have been a widow this very day—a widow! Which is best, *that*, or an unloved wife, like poor Alice is? What disappointment and unhappiness that grand match of hers has brought to all concerned in it!

“Fancy our Alice a widow! perhaps though, if Ralph *had* married Alice, he would never have gone to Radcliff, and he might have been living still! Oh! can it be that his death lies to our charge after all?”

While Mrs. Burges is making her wail at the window, thinking and weeping more bitterly than she has done for many a long day, the squire is galloping up the stony street leading to Leonard’s house, seeking to have an interview with him before he does his other business in Eastown.

He throws his reins to his groom, and sounds a sharp, quick *réveil* on the curate’s knocker that reverberates from one end of the street to the other, and makes the workmen in a neighbouring timber-yard run out at the gate to see what is going on.

"Is the Reverend Mr. Thwaites at home?"

Sarah, a little awed by the presence of so rare and so august a visitor, says her master *is* at home, and speedily ushers the squire in.

Leonard is at the very moment with Gertrude in the study, and they are talking about Ralph.

"Strange we never heard of him from that sudden and abrupt visit of his to Eastown, till this sad news reaches us."

"It is very strange; there was much about that visit of his I could never understand. Poor Ralph! What noble, self-devoted bravery his was! He was just the man to do some wonderfully brave and generous deed."

Gertrude's eyes have a tearful softness about them as she speaks thus. She is deeply moved, and Leonard and she are mourning for Ralph, their dear and valued friend.

Just then the creaking boots of the squire are heard in the passage. Sarah opens the study door, and his ruddy face pauses for a moment on the threshold, as his restless eyes glance round the room.

"Ha, Thwaites! I'm glad I've found you at home. How d'ye do, Mrs. Thwaites, quite well, I hope? you've grown quite a stranger at Grey Towers, we never see you there now. I've called about that affair of Ralph's, and I see by that ominous-looking paper in your hands, you've had a notice about him too."

"Yes, the lawyer, Mr. Atkin, has requested my presence at the poor fellow's funeral. A sad accident, was it not? His deed of self-sacrifice has something marvellous about it."

"Accident was it? I've heard no particulars. Pray how did it happen?"

"It occurred in the iron-works belonging to Mr. Curtis. A huge piece of machinery was being lifted, and all at once by some mismanagement, the whole weight of it was thrown on three men. Ralph, who was standing near, saw in an

instant they would be crushed to death, as they had lost all self-command in their panic. He rushed forward, gave the machinery a sudden impetus that allowed the three men to escape uninjured, but he could not save himself. In the rebound, the whole affair came crashing down, and the poor fellow was nearly buried under it. His death must have been instantaneous."

The squire shrugged his shoulders, and raised his eyebrows,—

"You call that action of Ralph's a brave one, do you? Now I call it a very rash piece of foolhardiness."

"But he saved the three men!" exclaims Gertrude, with tearful eyes and flushed cheeks. She feels indignant any one should snatch one leaf from Ralph's martyr-wreath.

"Oh yes! yes—of course;" another meaning shrug of the shoulders, and he turns to Leonard.

"Shall you go to the funeral, Thwaites?"

"I hope so, it is the last tribute of respect I can pay the poor fellow."

"Then don't you think it will be time enough to start by the first express to-morrow morning?"

"I should say not. The funeral takes place at twelve o'clock, and the express is not due at Radcliff till a few minutes before that hour. Any delay would be awkward; besides, the station is two miles from poor Ralph's house. Cabs are not easily got at the terminus, I understand."

"It's a horrid nuisance altogether! One has to make two days' work of it, and sleep in some stuffy bed or other at a strange inn. What shall you do, Thwaites?"

"I purpose leaving by the late train to-night."

"Then you will just get to Radcliff at daylight in the morning, too late to go to bed, and too early for breakfast. It's a vexation whichever way one looks at it. I thought of declining to go at first, but second thoughts are some-

times best, I suppose. By-the-bye, Mrs. Thwaites, how's your daughter?"

"Katie is quite well, thank you."

"The belle of Eastown, Philip used to call her before she was married. I suppose you often see her?"

"Oh yes! very often. Mr. Gurling and Katie were both here to tea last evening."

"Ha! very pleasant these family re-unions are. I wish we had a little more of Alice's company sometimes."

Something like a sigh escapes from the squire's lips, as he rises to go away.

"Then, Thwaites, I suppose I shall meet you down at Radcliff to-morrow. Come to Grey Towers and see us soon, Mrs. Thwaites. My wife will be very pleased at a visit from you."

Then the squire rides away—rides at a quick canter through the streets, his groom clattering at his heels.

Tom Burges is one of those impatient men who never can ride a horse at a moderate pace. He always tries to take the utmost speed out of an animal, tearing along the roads and streets as though his daily rides must be got over as soon as possible. Like many other unskilful riders, the faster he goes the more his spirit of reckless impetuosity develops itself. He has yet to learn "the merciful man is merciful to his beast."





CHAPTER XXXV.

DOWN AT RADCLIFF.



SCORCHING day in July; a small poorly-furnished parlour, with the windows and blinds closely drawn down, and four people who have met together for the first time in their lives.

Squire Burges glances round the place with a scarcely concealed look of contempt, first at the plain drugget on the floor, then at the unfashionable furniture and surroundings, and, lastly, at some exquisitely painted water-colours, —landscapes, that are hanging on the walls.

“Ah! Ralph was always fond of painting,” he remarks to no one in particular.

Mr. Abbot, the doctor, who is sitting at the table with a very grave, preoccupied look on his face, takes on himself the burden of replying.

“They are fine paintings; I’ve often admired them. Mr. Ralph Burges, though only an amateur, had quite an artist’s keen sense of beauty and fitness.”

“Yes, yes; I believe he could have done most things if he’d only had tact and perseverance. But, my dear sir, he never made his talents practical. I suppose there never was a man who made less of his opportunities.”

“Indeed! we all think so differently of him in this parish. We consider there never was a man here who did so much

good with the opportunities he had ; and his brave death has set the seal to a useful life."

" Ah, really now ! You are very kind to raise such a poean of praise to my unfortunate kinsman's memory ; yet, I repeat, had he acted with judgment, he might have been in a very different position ; he took a wrong track from the first."

The squire looks round with imposing hauteur on the group, and meets the keen eyes of Mr. Atkin, the lawyer, firmly fixed on him.

" May I ask what wrong track ? " inquires the doctor.

" Well, in his younger days he was sole heir to a wealthy relative, but he foolishly offended her, and she cut him off without a shilling."

" Indeed ! " echoes the doctor.

" In fact, Ralph Burges' life may be called a ' wasted life. ' "

Squire Burges glances round the meagrely-adorned apartment again ; perhaps he is contrasting it with his own luxuriantly-furnished rooms at Grey Towers.

Meanwhile, a harsh, noisy, scuffling sound is going on upstairs, as though many men with heavy tread are moving to and fro.

" They are coming now, I should think," the squire says, listening.

" They are preparing to move the coffin," the doctor explains.

Mr. Atkin at this minute steps over to Squire Burges, and says quickly,—

" Where is your son, Philip Burges ? Why is he not here to-day ? "

The squire hardly represses a smile of contempt as he says haughtily,—

" My son is staying at Richmond at present ; young men have many engagements, you know."

Tom fixes his eyes on the lawyer as though he would extinguish him at once ; but the little man is not to be put down ; he exclaims in a tone of authority,—

"No engagement should have been considered of sufficient importance to keep him away ; he should have made a point of being here."

A sharp retort rises to the squire's tongue, but before he has time to utter it, the undertaker, who sees something unpleasant is threatening, tries to turn it aside by offering a glass of wine to each of the gentlemen, also some hard biscuits that stand on a small table near the window.

Squire Burges drinks off his wine at a draught, then sets the glass down with a very visible expression of disgust on his face.

"Terrible stuff that ! Where in the world do you get your wine down in this place ?"

"No doubt that was bought at the village inn, for Mr. Ralph Burges never indulged in stimulants. He kept no store of wine."

"Just like Ralph ; he never did anything like other people. Are they never coming ?"

The sour wine seems to have banished all the squire's remaining amiability. He glances fiercely up at the ceiling, and listens to the sound of trampling feet that seem now to be moving towards the door with their burden.

They come nearer and nearer ; the measured tread is heard on the stairs, and in the passage outside, when there is a pause.

"I suppose Mr. Thwaites is at the church ?" asks the squire.

"Yes ; he breakfasted with our incumbent ; they will go there together," whispers Dr. Abbot.

"Can you inform me when the next train starts for Eastown ?"

Mr. Atkin steps forward before a reply can be made.

"You can't return to Eastown by the next train, Mr. Burges. I shall require your presence here after the funeral."

"What for, pray ?"

"There is a will to be read."

"Ah ! indeed ! I should hardly have thought Ralph would make a will."

Here the trampling of feet is heard again, and at a sign from the undertaker, the gentlemen pass out of the door, and fall into their places.

Mr. Tom Burges with a long hat band floating from his hat, and with a black cloak falling in ample folds round him—symbols of grief—stalks slowly after the coffin, as chief mourner.

A little procession is waiting in the street—a strangely touching one.

First came the three men—in deep mourning—whose lives Ralph had saved at the sacrifice of his own ; then, the master, clerks, and workmen from Mr. Curtis's factory—about 200 altogether—all with crape on their hats and arms, and these follow slowly behind the chief mourners.

People, young and old, women and children, men and boys, crowd the streets, and windows, and door-steps, to look on ; and many tears are shed as the coffin passes, for Ralph's brave death is the chief topic of interest in Radcliff now, and will be for many a long day to come.

They pass on with slow pace all through the scorching streets, where the noon-day sun pours down fiercely on their heads, up the steep hill and through the lich-gate into the churchyard, and then, with bowed heads, they gather round the grave.

"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust ;" none ever feel the full import of the solemn words till their best and dearest have been buried out of sight.

Oh ! we could hardly bear them at all, did not the glorious hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord and Saviour, soften and sanctify them to our hearts.

When the funeral guests return to the house, Squire Burges looks impatiently at Mr. Atkin, and signals him to begin at once. He wishes to have the business over as

soon as possible. Not that he has any great expectation of benefit accruing to him from Ralph Burges' will, for he argues to himself, "What can a pauper like he have power to leave?"

Mr. Atkin does not appear to notice his impatience. He adjusts his papers, glancing silently over them till Tom's patience is utterly exhausted. He turns quickly to his next neighbour, the doctor, and exclaims,—

"I want to start for Eastown at once, or this broiling village of yours will be the death of me. I've been in a state of fever ever since I came to Radcliff. I thought I should have had sun-stroke in the churchyard, and now this room is like the black hole of Calcutta."

"Shall I open the window?" asks the doctor politely.

"Just as you please; it doesn't matter to me. I shall be off as soon as this reading is over."





CHAPTER XXXVI.

AUNT HETTY'S LAST WILL.

THE lawyer begins to read in a dry, hard voice, some notes he has evidently prepared for the occasion.

"Mr. Ralph Burges left no will of his own, but I have a list of bequests he has made to the poor of this place, and this I will hand over to you, sir." He bows to the incumbent of Radcliff. "The will I bring before your notice to-day is that of the late Mrs. Hetty Burges, of Grey Towers."

Tom smiles. "I know the contents of *that* will already, for under it I hold my estates and property."

"There is a later will than the one to which you allude. It was held intact during Mr. Ralph Burges' life, but now, at his decease, it comes into operation."

"Pray what do you mean, sir? I can't understand you; mind, I'll have no trifling nor nonsense in this matter."

"Mrs. Hetty Burges—repenting of having made a will, the execution of which was forced on her by Mr. Thomas Burges, and which was wholly in his favour—made a second will before her death, of a very different character. In this Ralph Burges is reinstated as her heir."

"Your speech sounds like a libel on me; you had better be careful what you say. If Aunt Hetty made Ralph her heir, why on earth didn't he put in his claim?" shouted the squire, in a fury of rage.

"You remember, Mr. Burges, your daughter was solemnly betrothed to him, and had not other views been entertained for Miss Burges, he would have married her. Notwithstanding your daughter's marriage to Sir Stanley West, Ralph's esteem for the woman of his choice was not lessened; and that she might be spared injury or unhappiness through his means, he declined to urge his rights. The will remained intact during his lifetime, as I before remarked; and with a wonderful amount of generosity and self-sacrifice my client lived and died in obscurity. You, Thomas Burges, have been enjoying what was legally his property."

A silence falls on the listeners; the pathetic history Mr. Atkin unfolds seemed to awe; even the squire for the moment is impressed and startled.

Mr. Atkin then reads the will through to the end, and by the time the last word is uttered, Tom has recovered himself.

"That's a scandalous will from beginning to end. My name is never mentioned in it at all; and only a paltry three hundred a year left to my son. Thwaites, I congratulate you on your good fortune, though I frankly tell you I shall dispute the will. Aunt Hetty must have been mad as a March hare when she signed it. I shall have no difficulty in proving what an utter lunatic she was."

The squire works himself by degrees into a wild fury of passion; the more deeply the truth sinks into his heart, the more violent he becomes. For a time he makes a pitiable exhibition of himself as he gives vent to his anger and mortification, his vexation and wrath!

In vain Mr. Atkin tries to urge his authority; in vain Leonard attempts reconciliation; while the storm of fury sweeps over him, Tom is like one bereft of his senses.

The men in the room grow silent for very pity, as bitter words of passion and animosity burst forth from his lips.

Then with a face white with rage, and lips trembling as with ague, the squire dashes out of the house, walks rapidly

to the railway-station, and starts off by a train just leaving for Eastown.

Very few people are in the train at that hour; he has the whole of a first-class carriage to himself; and there, with his eyes closed, he tries to realize his position.

He never once notices the rapid motion of the express-train that bears him along; never once glances out at the smiling country, and the sunny harvest-fields near which he passes. He cares not where he goes or what happens, for his despair is that of a reckless, desperate man.

These are but a tithe of the thoughts that whirl through the bewildered brains of the luckless squire, in the lonely railway-carriage, as the train bears him rapidly on his journey. Tom's prevailing desire in life was to be rich and great. For this end he had stopped at nothing—honour and integrity had been sacrificed in many ways.

True, his contrivances had appeared to succeed at one time—all seemed turning out according to his wish—but now his greatness is shrouded up with a cloud; his fickle treasures are about to elude his grasp; the "gold and fine gold" is slipping beyond his reach again.

His life, and not Ralph Burges', has been the "wasted life" after all.

He has never tried to do good with either his money or his influence; has never given to the poor; never sought to ease the aching heart, or fill the hungry mouth; never in all his prosperity remembered Him who says, "The silver is mine, and the gold is mine."

The wildest and most incoherent fancies float through his distracted brains. One would utterly shrink from following the course of them, or from narrating his wild resolves and revengeful determinations.

Suffice it to say, that out of the dense chaos, his self-condemnation is the feeling that seethes, and rises, and lasts longest.

Oh! what a short-sighted fool he has been, with all his keen worldly wisdom. He has been wearing away

his heart in plans to aggrandize himself and family, and now all his plans are turned to poisoned stings, to fret, and pierce, and wound him.

Had he not in the first instance prejudiced poor Aunt Hetty against her other heirs, doubtless she would have made a just division of the property among them all.

Again, had he in later days allowed Alice to marry Ralph, there would have been but little danger of Grey Towers leaving his family, and, oh ! what a different husband would generous, high-minded, unselfish Ralph have made, compared to the man he had himself forced his daughter to marry.

After all, the property has not brought him true happiness. His neighbours do not really respect him, they show it in many ways, very hard to bear.

He is in hot water with his tenants, who, one and all, despise him as a landlord, and detest his overbearing ways.

His sons, Philip especially, are almost reckless in their demands for money, *spending* is an art in which the whole family have proved themselves wonderfully expert.

And yet they are none of them as happy as they were long ago at Kingston ; Grey Towers has not been the home of bliss he once expected it would prove.

Leonard Thwaites, the parson, a man with whom he never felt exactly at ease, will now come forward with flying colours, and triumph over his fall,—showing how unjust his estimate of Leonard's character really is : but some men judge others by themselves—they have no loftier or better standard.





CHAPTER XXXVII.

CONCLUSION.

TOM BURGESS does not try to prove Aunt Hetty was a lunatic when she made that last will of hers ; doubtless he very soon finds out it will be far better for him to let the matter rest as it is. Ugly truths might come out if a very rigid examination took place that he would neither be able to gainsay nor deny.

His one object now is to get away from Grey Towers as soon as possible, and before the news is made public.

Crushed and mortified as he is, he has not the slightest intention of staying at Easttown to be pitied, or blamed, or laughed at by the people over whom he has hitherto taken such a lofty stand.

So he has all the moveable goods packed up, and sets off by train to London, with his wife, the very next day.

"Shall you be long away, sir ?" asks the groom, hat in hand.

"Our stay in London is very uncertain, but you shall hear from me in a few days," replies the squire haughtily, as he takes his place in the carriage beside his closely-veiled wife, whose red eyes and altogether over-done manner, are just then a grievance and a vexation to him.

"Don't be so silly, Hannah ! you'll set people's tongues wagging before we are even out of sight," whispers he, fiercely.

"Oh ! do have a little feeling, Tom ! My heart's fairly breaking at having to leave dear old Grey Towers."

"Dear old Grey Towers, indeed ! It has been *dear* to me in more ways than one, I wish I'd never set foot in it ; however, we are clear of it now."

Tom stands up in the carriage, and takes a long look back at the place, and at the four grey "pepper-boxes" that are glistening above the trees in the summer sunshine.

Just the same kind of bright day as that on which they had first arrived there. How short a time ago it seems now, and yet how many incidents have happened in that time !

"If I could only have seen poor Alice before we left, I should not have cared half as much," whines the sorrowful mother in a sobbing burst of grief.

"Be quiet, Hannah ! Have more self-command, will you ! the very coachman will suspect something presently. How could you possibly have sent word to Alice ? or how could you have gone there without proclaiming the news to the whole parish ? You can write to Alice when we get to London. Ah ! it makes me laugh to think that husband of hers will be done out of the five thousand pounds Alice was to have at my death. He'll be a sharer in the loss also. Won't he rave when he gets well enough to hear about it all."

"I hope he won't visit his ravings and disappointment on poor Alice," sobs Mrs. Burges, with a fresh gush of tears.

"Let's change the subject, Hannah ; I'm sick of Grey Towers and all connected with it. The less I hear about it in future the better pleased I shall be."

When they reach the terminus, the squire, who carefully studies appearances to the last, hands his wife out of the carriage with the utmost show of politeness, and hurries into the station with her, lest her tear-stained face might be observed by the coachman.

He finds a shady corner in the railway carriage for her, then goes to see about the luggage, which a couple of carts

have already brought over to the station, "necessary for their lengthened visit to town," he says.

Ere long he has bidden farewell to the place for ever. He came into it with all the pomp of pride and arrogance, he leaves it a mortified and angry man.

He has had some deep and solemn lessons during his sojourn at Grey Towers. He finds wealth does not give unalloyed pleasure, that right *will* triumph over ill-doing in the end—though the end is not always visible in this lower sphere. The remembrance of these and many other teachings occupy his thoughts during that farewell journey. It will be well for him if the instruction proves salutary, and leads him to God, whose grace can reach the deep depths of hearts, callous as even his has been.

As soon as Tom and his wife arrive in London, Philip Burges is summoned from Richmond to a family conference, and then he hears the startling news his friends have to relate.

He grasps the subject immediately, sees through actions and motives in the times past that have often sorely puzzled him—he understands far more than his father intends he should, and mentally decides "Grey Towers and their possession of it was a bad business—rotten at the core—no foundation—sham—pretence, and a delusion altogether!"

Having thus summed up the matter, he is not the one to reproach or upbraid now. He keeps his knowledge to himself, and tries hard to discover what is the wisest course to take.

It cheers broken-hearted Mrs. Burges to see Philip sitting there in the hotel window, his handsome face looking cheery and hopeful, as the faint radiance of a city's sun-set falls slantingly on him, and it cheers her to hear him rattle on carelessly as ever.

"Don't be down-hearted, dad," he exclaims. "There's still a wide world for us all; for we will henceforth cast in *our* lot together. Now listen to what I propose. Let us

all go to Canada. I'm absolutely used up, and sick of the old country. Let us try our fortune in 'fresh fields, and pastures new.' There is room for energy and true, honourable work out there. Never fear! the old ship 'Burgess' isn't swamped and water-logged yet. We shall all weather the storm, and sail away merrily again."

Philip's words come to his mother like the vigorous north wind would come to the sun-scorched, fevered traveller, and she rouses up to reply,—

"Perhaps emigration would be the best thing, Philip—particularly for the four boys. We could never keep them at expensive schools now, and there's no great prospect for them here in after-life."

"I'm sure it would, mother. We shan't be beggars after all. There's my three hundred a year, which of course I shall throw into the family exchequer—a slight return for the heavy pulls I've had on it before now. I, for one, am longing for hard work, and a healthy, energetic life, free from the flimsy conventionalisms of society. What do you say to it, father?"

"I believe it would be the wisest plan after all, Philip." Then Mrs. Burgess lifts her tear-stained eyes, and asserts decidedly,—

"I would much rather go abroad, where everybody is new and strange, than return to Kingston again in our altered circumstances. I should never hold up my head amongst people who once envied us, but would now perhaps pity, or look down scornfully on us."

Philip laughs outright.

"Ah, 'Mrs. Grundy' decides the matter after all! Far better begin a new life in a new country where the finger of reproach and contempt shall never be raised against us, than rust away in the kind of life we've been living at Grey Towers. We've had enough of that sort of thing. So cheer up, mother, good courage and brave hearts to the fore, and off we go!"

Philip's advice carries weight now. According to his light the young man becomes equal to the occasion, and his energy rises as he goes on.

And as his son takes up the reins with a sort of determination that shows he is very much in earnest, it is marvellous to see how Tom Burges tames down, and is satisfied to leave the management to other hands. Perhaps a consciousness comes over him that Philip will conduct affairs better than he has done, and he is perfectly right in thinking so.

Before another month is over, final arrangements have been made. It is astonishing how skilful Leonard Thwaites is in his large-hearted and generous way. He smooths down difficulties and helps the Burges in carrying out these very arrangements, so that before the harvest moon is shining over Grey Towers, Tom Burges, his wife, and sons are looking their farewell to English shores, as they steam slowly down the river.

Alice—Lady West would fain have gone to see her friends before they sailed, but a sorrow has fallen on Stourton Hall and she cannot leave home.

Sir Stanley has met with a terrible accident. One day he was out trying a new horse—a spirited creature with more temper than good training. There is a rough fence near, and his master determines he shall leap it. The animal hesitates, and shows visible signs of cowardice, or unwillingness, that at once rouses the baronet's impatience, and he urges the horse forward with whip and spur.

There is a fierce conflict between man and beast for an instant—then a start, a crash, and Sir Stanley is thrown on the ground, where he lies without sense or motion for hours before he is discovered.

It all occurs on his own land—on a piece of rugged fenced-in road, at the back of the thick wood that shadows Stourton Hall—within a short walk of the house, yet it so happens no one passes that way, or suspects the dire tragedy that has taken place.

Just at nightfall, a herd sees the horse teeding in a turnip field, with a saddle on his back, and startled by this, he makes a further search, and discovers Sir Stanley lying half dead on a heap of stones.

Thus he is borne home to Alice, and for days his life is despaired off. The doctors come and go, and shake their heads, and talk of the case as an almost hopeless one. But by-and-by signs of recovery appear, and then Alice is told though her husband may in a measure regain strength of mind and body he can never return to his former vigorous health. His spine is injured, and for him field sports and riding are over for ever.

The invalid's carriage, the invalid's slow, tottering walk are the realities to which he will have to look forward, even at the most favourable issue of the case.

And about this time comes the news of Ralph Burges' death to Alice, and with it the history of that generous self-sacrifice he made for her sake in not claiming the Grey Towers estate.

Lady West hears of it with amazement, and something of the meaning of unselfish love dawns on her mind.

How different Ralph's loyal, lofty affection has been to her poor, repining, fretful, morbid feeling, that was only a form of selfishness after all.

What would Ralph have thought of her could he have seen her as she has dawdled her life aimlessly on?

Hours without number of oppressive "ennui" have been hers, seasons of positive dissatisfaction and ill-humour, times of cold chilling haughtiness. Had it been possible for him to have known of this, might he not have considered his generosity misplaced? his self-sacrifice as thrown away on one not worthy of it? Alice is absolutely abashed and humiliated, as these thoughts pass through her mind.

True, the unfortunate man lying there so still and silent, with his face blanched, and rigid, and pain-stamped, and

expressionless, has not been the best of husbands, the most faultless of men. Nay, his faults have been many, his temper most trying, and most difficult to manage.

Yet with all this there were hopeful points in his character that a loving, high-souled wife might have helped to develope and in time might have brought to greater perfectness.

Might not an affectionate word have soothed away many an impatient burst of temper? Might not a well-timed caress have calmed down much harshness? And the sweet counsels of a wise judgment might have curbed many irregularities, and have made life a better thing to him.

These were all parts and portions of the duties of a faithful wife.

Alice's eyes are open now ; she sees that if her husband has been faulty, there have been numberless shortcomings on her side also. She looks at him as he lies there on the pillow, so weak and helpless, his lips bloodless, his hands lying heavily on the white coverlid, and tears rise to her eyes as she bends over him.

All his hardness and harshness have died out now ; he is passive as a child, and his voice comes forth in broken whispers. He looks up to his wife with the imploring helplessness so touching in the sick, and as she meets his glance she feels greater love and sympathy for him than she has ever felt before.

Sir Stanley sees the drops glittering in her eyes and thinks she is weeping for him, that grief for his pain has caused them, and he softly draws her hand towards him, and presses it to his fevered lips. He knows nothing of the self-reproach that is bowing her down to the dust as recollections press on her memory, nor does he know of the pleading prayer at her heart that is crying out for "more strength, more light."

Oh ! how she longs to be all Ralph thought her—such as *he* would have approved. Henceforth her desire will be to *do* life's duties well, and to do them as to God.

"Alice, Alice! my lips are *so* parched and dry," whispers the sick man, half raising his head, and looking round towards her.

His wife is beside him in a moment, with the glass in her hand. She lifts his head gently, gives him the needed drink, and presses her lips to his as she smooths the pillow.

"Darling wife! *my* Alice! How good of you to stay here in this dull room, when you ought to be out enjoying the bright sunshine," whispers he.

"I don't find it dull, Stanley. I would much rather be here with you."

"Thank you, my dear! how kind of you to say so."

Alice watches a gratified smile flicker over his face as he replies, then, like a wearied child, he closes his eyes and falls into a calm, dreamless sleep.

Lady West sits by the bedside till the evening sun sets, and twilight comes on, filling the large room with gaunt shadows; she will not even rise to ring for lights, lest her footsteps should disturb the sleeping man.

Her life in future will be full of cares for her husband, no need to complain of want of duties, for attendance on a helpless invalid will require all her energies, and all her patience, too.

She thinks of all this as she watches his soft, regular breathing, and more than ever her prayer goes up for more of the Holy Spirit's guidance through all the difficult way that lies before her. Still goes up the cry for "more strength, more light, for Christ's sake."

And now the chronicle of "Aunt Hetty's Will" must be closed, for one can easily imagine how Leonard and Gertrude will carry their true simplicity and right principle into their new home at Grey Towers.

Worldly prosperity is not likely to change them, though they are thankful—oh! so thankful—for all the mercies bestowed on them; but the possession brings neither pride nor ostentation with it, nor does triumph over Squire Burges actuate them in the slightest degree.

The religion that dwelt in their hearts and made sunshine in their lives even in the dull house in the dingy street of Eastown, is not one whit less cherished in their more stately home.

Their motto still is, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord."

THE END.

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